

External World Skepticism

Ram Neta

1. Introduction

Skepticism has a long history in philosophy. But skeptical concern with “the external world” is a more recent phenomenon. The phenomenon is sometimes thought to have originated in the early modern period, perhaps with Descartes (1993) or Locke (1975). But it is not clear that this is true: to know whether Descartes’s argument for the existence of what he called “extended substance,” or whether Locke’s claim to have sensitive knowledge of what he called “material substance,” constitute attempts to address skepticism about “the external world,” we would have to understand not only what Descartes and Locke meant by those phrases, but also what we mean by the phrase “the external world”. I begin with a discussion of that issue.

2. What Is the “External World“?

One way to approach the task of trying to understand what it is that early 21st-century philosophers who’ve been trained in the Anglophone tradition might have in mind when we speak of the “external world” is to look at the texts that have most directly influenced our thinking. We can look, for instance, at some of Bertrand Russell’s writings on what he called “matter.”

Russell (1912) asks what, if anything, we can know about a particular table that we perceive. After noting the various ways in which our perception of the table varies independently of any variation in the table itself, he writes:

Let us give the name of ‘sense-data’ to the things that are immediately known in sensation: such things as colours, sounds, smells, hardnesses, roughnesses, and

so on. ... It is plain that if we are to know anything about the table, it must be by means of the sense-data—brown colour, oblong shape, smoothness, etc.—which we associate with the table; but, for the reasons which have been given, we cannot say that the table is the sense-data, or even that the sense-data are directly properties of the table. Thus a problem arises as to the relation of the sense-data to the real table, supposing there is such a thing.

The real table, if it exists, we will call a ‘physical object’. Thus we have to consider the relation of sense-data to physical objects. The collection of all physical objects is called ‘matter’. (Russell 1912: 4–5)

In this passage, Russell introduces the term “physical object” by means of a single example (the table), and his only hint as to what it is about that example that makes it an example of the category at issue is that our perceptions of it can vary independently of variation in it, and so cannot be identical to it. But it’s not clear that this fixes what category Russell has in mind: there are plenty of things that we typically perceive when we look at (say) a table, and many of those perceived things are not identical with our perceptions of them. For instance, when I look at a table, I typically perceive a situation of one kind or another (e.g., people sitting at a table having dinner) and I typically perceive a complex scene (e.g., a dining room in a state of disarray) and these things are not identical to my perception of them.

Further constraints on the category of “physical object” are imposed elsewhere in Russell’s writings from the same period. For instance, Russell (1957) treats “physical objects” as logical constructions out of actual and possible sense-data. This has some utility: the logical construction itself imposes structural constraints on what can count as a physical object; for instance, it is a consequence of how Russell’s construction works

that no physical object can be completely contained in two entirely distinct regions of physical space at the same time. But the “sense-data” that serve as the materials for the construction are themselves explained only as those things that are given in sense at one time and that might be singled out by attention. Unfortunately, this account of “sense-data” leaves open precisely how that category is understood: why not say, for instance, that a particular table is given in sense at one time, and might be singled out by attention? In other words, why exclude tables from the category of “sense-data”? Nothing that Russell says in his characterization of “sense-data” answers this question.

An alternative conception of the “external world” is provided by G.E. Moore, in his celebrated “Proof of an External World” (1959b). Moore devotes most of that paper to characterizing the category of external things, or “things to be met with in space.” This phrase, Moore writes, is to be understood in such a way that

many ‘things’, e.g., after-images, double images, bodily pains, which might be said to be ‘presented in space’, are nevertheless not to be reckoned as ‘things that are to be met with in space’, and ... there is no contradiction in supposing that there have been and are ‘to be met with in space’ things which never have been, are not now, and never will be perceived, nor in supposing that among those of them which have at some time been perceived many existed at times at which they were not being perceived. (1959b: 156)

For Moore, the category of “external things” is the category of space-occupying things that may fail ever to be perceived. This is as close as Moore gets to characterizing external things, and it is also as close as anyone in the contemporary discussion of skepticism about the external world has gotten to characterizing them. Thankfully, his

characterization, rough as it is, will prove useful to us in understanding what gives rise to skeptical doubts concerning our epistemic relation to the external world specifically.

3. The Varieties of Skepticism

Before canvassing the considerations that have raised skeptical doubts concerning our epistemic relation to the external world, I should first distinguish the various forms that such skepticism has taken. Skepticisms can differ in their attitude, their depth, and their scope.

A skeptic's attitude may be one of doubt, one of denial, one of suspension, or one of withholding. In other words, a skeptic may harbor doubts concerning whether we possess a positive epistemic relation to external things, or she may outright deny that we possess any such positive epistemic relation, or she may suspend belief concerning whether we possess any such relation, or she may altogether withhold any attitude concerning whether we possess any such relation: one dimension along which forms of skepticism differ, then, is in attitude.

Another way in which different forms of skepticism differ from each other is in their depth, i.e., the range of epistemic positions concerning which they are skeptical. Our common convictions are that we know that we live on the Earth, we justifiably believe that we live on the Earth, we have justification for believing that we live on the Earth, it is rational for us to believe that we live on the Earth, and we have evidence that we live on the Earth. A relatively superficial skepticism may call into question the first of these common convictions, without calling into question any of the others. A much deeper form of skepticism will call into question all five of these common convictions.

Finally, skepticisms differ from each other in the range of facts our epistemic relation to which they call into question. Thus, there is skepticism about the external

world, skepticism about the future, skepticism about the past, skepticism about other minds, skepticism about value, and so on. Of course, there are also forms of skepticism that are completely general with respect to range, i.e., they call into question our epistemic relation to all facts of any kind. Such completely general forms of skepticism include the forms that have been defended by appeal to Agrippa's Trilemma (see Sextus Empiricus (1996) or Williams (2001)), those that have been defended by appeal to the Problem of the Criterion (see Chisholm (1982)) and that which was defended by Unger (1975).

In the next section, I survey the various arguments that have been offered for one or another version of skepticism concerning the external world.

4. The Considerations that Generate the Problem of the External World

The skeptical problem of the external world has been developed in four ways, though it is a matter of some controversy what relation these four skeptical arguments bear to each other (Brueckner (1994) argues, for example, that the argument from underdetermination and the argument from closure are not distinct). What all four of them have in common is that they depend on the thought that perceptual experience can vary independently of the external world: there is, in short, a gap between appearance and reality. But this crude idea gets developed in different ways in each of the following four lines of thought.

4a. The Argument from Fallibility

Our beliefs about the external world are formed in ways that are fallible: beliefs formed in those ways (i.e., through a series of events that involve the stimulation of one's sensory surfaces, the resulting transmission of a chemical signal through one's neural

pathways, and consequent belief fixation) are liable to be false, since the parts of the external world that initiate that series of events can be utterly different from how they are represented as being by the beliefs that lie at the end of that series. But if a belief is formed in a way that is liable to be false, then it is a matter of good fortune if and when that belief is true. But, when a belief is knowledgeably held, then it is not a matter of good fortune that the belief is true. Thus, our beliefs about the external world are not knowledgeably held.

The argument is articulated by Albritton (2011):

The argument, here, is from natural possibility to epistemic possibility. Imagine a philanthropic lottery in which almost everyone wins, but to keep things exciting... there are a few losing tickets. I have a ticket, like all the others. I have no concrete reason to suppose that it, in particular, as distinguished from others, may lose. But this lottery is so set up that some tickets do lose. That's a perfectly concrete fact about the lottery, and is a compelling reason... to suppose that this ticket I've bought may lose. I don't know that it will, but I don't know that it won't, either. (Albritton 2011: 7–8)

The “natural possibility” that Albritton here takes to establish a skeptical conclusion is the possibility that our ways of forming beliefs lead us into error. The plausibility of Albritton's view here is indicated by the fact that, in developing his very influential account of knowledge, Armstrong (1973) claims that a belief can be knowledgeably held only if it was formed in a way that, by the laws of nature, guarantees the truth of the belief. If nature allows the possibility that a particular belief, formed in a particular

way, is false, then that belief is not knowledgeably held. But when, Albritton's skeptic pointedly asks, does nature not allow that possibility?

4b. The Argument from Underdetermination

Descartes thought he could demonstrate the existence of extended substance in his Sixth Meditation by appeal to the non-deceptiveness of God and our natural inclination to believe that our sensory ideas are caused by extended things. Berkeley (1975) thought he could demonstrate that Descartes was wrong by calling into question the possibility that our sensory ideas represent material substances. But Russell (1959) thought both philosophers were wrong: the existence of matter, said Russell, is a hypothesis, and we cannot achieve certainty concerning the truth or falsity of that hypothesis. The hypothesis, Russell thought, is credible because it provides the simplest and most conservative explanation of our having the sense-data that we have. While there may be disagreement concerning Russell's claim that this explanation is simplest (perhaps it is simpler to say that God is the direct cause of everything) or most conservative (perhaps it is more conservative, at least for children and other primitive thinkers, to say that spirits are the direct cause of everything), it seems more plausible to say that the hypothesis in question provides the best explanation of our having the sense-data that we have—whatever exactly is packed into its being the “best.” And so this is precisely the view that a number of contemporary philosophers have adopted. We can call this view “abductivism.”

Abductivism comes in two main varieties: externalist and internalist. According to the externalist version of the view, defended by Lycan (1988) and Goldman (1988), what makes us justified in our belief that there are material objects, and in many of our more specific beliefs about the behavior of those objects and their causal role in shaping

our sensory experiences, is the very fact—whether or not we are aware of it—that the contents of those beliefs do provide the best explanation for our having the sensory experiences that we have. According to this externalist version of the view, explanatory “bestness” is a relation that can obtain between our sensory experiences (the explananda) and the hypotheses that we believe about the external world (the explanans) whether we are aware that it obtains. The internalist version of abductivism, defended in various forms by Harman (1973), Vogel (1990), and Bonjour (1985), claims that we are justified in believing in the existence of material objects, and also believing various hypotheses about their behavior, because we are justified in believing that these hypotheses provide the best explanation of our sensory experiences.

Abductivism, in either of its forms, paves the way for the skeptical argument from “underdetermination.” Why, this skeptic will ask, should we grant that our hypotheses about material objects do in fact provide the uniquely best explanation of our sensory experiences? If, in fact, another hypothesis does just as well at explaining our sensory experiences, then, by the externalist abductivist’s own lights, this implies that we are not justified in our beliefs about the external world. Or, even if no other hypothesis does just as well at explaining our sensory experiences, still, so long as we have no reason to believe that our hypotheses about the external world provide the uniquely best explanation of our sensory experiences, then, by the internalist abductivist’s lights, this implies that we are not justified in believing those hypotheses about the external world.

4c. The Argument from Closure

You take yourself to know that you have hands. But notice that, if you do have hands, then you are not merely a brain floating in a vat of nutrient fluid and being

electrochemically stimulated to have the sensory experiences that you have now: such a brain does not have hands, but you do. So if you know that you do have hands, then you must also be in a position to know that you are not such a brain. But how could you know that you are not such a brain? If you were such a brain, everything would seem exactly as it does now; you would (by hypothesis) have all the same sensory experiences that you're having right now. Since your empirical knowledge of the world around you must somehow be based upon your sensory experiences, how could these experiences—the very same experiences that you would have if you were a brain in a vat—furnish you with knowledge that you're not such a brain? And if you don't know that you're not such a brain, then you cannot know that you have hands.

Although the skeptical argument just stated applies specifically to your putative knowledge that you have hands, it needn't have targeted that proposition in particular: your putative knowledge that you have feet, or that you have a head, or that you live on the planet Earth, or that Lincoln is the capital of Nebraska—all of these empirical propositions about the external world would have done just as well for the skeptic's purposes. And so, if the skeptical argument just stated can call into question your knowledge that you have hands, it can call into question all of our empirical knowledge of the external world.

This skeptical argument is an instance of modus tollens on the following principle:

If S knows that p , and S knows that p implies q , then S is in a position to know that q .

If we let p be any ordinary empirical proposition about the external world (e.g., “I have hands”), and q be the negation of some skeptical hypothesis that is logically inconsistent with p (e.g., “I am a handless brain in a vat”), then we get the following instance of the principle above:

If S knows that she has hands, and knows that her having hands implies that she is not a handless brain in a vat, then S is in a position to know that she is not a handless brain in a vat.

The argument from closure begins from the premise that the consequent of this conditional is false, but the second conjunction of the antecedent is true. It concludes, then, that the first conjunct of the antecedent must be false. More generally, it concludes, empirical knowledge of the external world is impossible.

Some philosophers, following Moore’s (1959a, 1959c) lead, have been tempted to do a modus ponens where the skeptic does a modus tollens, and argue that, because we do have empirical knowledge of the external world, it follows that we must be in a position to know that the skeptic’s hypotheses are false. But to this the skeptic can reply: “How can you know that my hypotheses are false? You cannot know it empirically, since your sensory evidence would be just the same if my hypotheses were true. And of course you cannot hope to achieve knowledge of contingencies about the external world non-empirically. So you cannot know that my hypotheses are false.”

What this skeptic demands is an account of how it is possible to know that we are not in a skeptical scenario in which, by hypothesis, our sensory experiences are exactly the way that they are now, but in which our beliefs about the external world are generally

wrong. It is not obvious how to satisfy this demand, and thus the argument from closure can generate skepticism about the external world.

4d. The Argument from Dogmatism

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that you are in possession of some particular bit of empirical knowledge about the external world—for instance, that you have hands. In what way is it better to have this knowledge than merely to hold a true opinion to the effect that you have hands? This is an issue that Socrates addresses by means of an analogy that he offers at the end of Plato (1976):

this is an illustration of the nature of true opinions: while they abide with us they are beautiful and fruitful, but they run away out of the human soul, and do not remain long, and therefore they are not of much value until they are fastened by the tie of the cause ... But when they are bound, in the first place, they have the nature of knowledge; and, in the second place, they are abiding. And this is why knowledge is more honourable and excellent than true opinion, because fastened by a chain. (Plato 1976, 31)

How should we understand Socrates's claim that knowledge, unlike true opinions, is "fastened by a chain" or "fastened by the tie of the cause"? And how does such "fastening" prevent knowledge from running "away out of the human soul"? Although there is considerable scholarly controversy concerning these questions, here is one plausible sort of answer: to know that p , for Socrates, involves not merely having the true opinion that p but moreover involves understanding "the cause" of one's taking it to be true that p . The cause that one understands is the reason for which one takes it to

be true that p . And so knowledge differs from true opinion at least by virtue of one's having a good reason—a reason that one understands—for taking it to be true. But how does this difference help to make it the case that knowledge does not “run away out of the human soul”? Is this merely an empirical claim to the effect that one is less likely to forget that p if one knows that p than if one merely has the true opinion that p ? I think not: even if Socrates took such an empirical claim to be true, he gives no evidence for its truth here. Rather, I think we can more plausibly understand Socrates's claim if we think about the way in which knowing that p entitles us to dismiss apparent counterevidence to p . So, given that you know that you have hands, if a stranger tells you that you do not have any hands, then you are entitled to dismiss the stranger's testimony: her testimony should not affect your high degree of confidence that you have hands. We can abbreviate this point by saying that, when you know that p , your knowledge is “indefeasible”: no apparent counterevidence to p can make it rational for you to lower your confidence in p . This requirement on knowledge was defended in recent philosophy by McDowell 1982.

But if this is what knowledge requires, then the case for skepticism about the external world may seem overwhelmingly plausible, since it seems that very few, if any, of our empirical beliefs about the external world satisfy this stiff requirement. Consider, for instance, your very confidently held belief that you have hands: is there any apparent counterevidence that can make it rational for you to lower your confidence that you have hands? It seems there is: imagine if, a moment from now, you have an extremely vivid and lifelike experience as of waking up from a dream, lying in a hospital bed, looking down at your arms and seeing that your hands have been amputated. In such a case, would it not be rational for you to be at least slightly less confident of your having hands than you now are? And if this “waking up in a hospital bed” experience were the

beginning of a long stream of coherent conscious experience, throughout which it seemed clear to you that you had no hands, would this not make it irrational for you to maintain your present level of confidence that you have hands? It seems so. But, in that case, if knowledge makes it rationally permissible for you to dismiss all apparent counterevidence to what you know, then you do not know that you have hands. Since the proposition that you have hands was chosen as an arbitrary example of an empirically grounded belief about the external world, and the same considerations would apply to virtually any other empirically grounded belief about the external world, it follows that you have virtually no empirical knowledge of the external world. The indefeasibility requirement on knowledge—if indeed it is a requirement—seems to make the world safe for skepticism.

The four sorts of arguments I've canvassed in this section—arguments from fallibility, from underdetermination, from closure, and from dogmatism—have been the main ways in which skepticism about the external world has been dialectically generated. In the next section, I will canvass the main ways in which epistemologists have attempted to rebut these four sorts of argument.

5. Responses to the Skeptical Arguments

5a. Responses to the Argument from Fallibility

By far the most common response to the argument from fallibility—the response issued (either explicitly or implicitly) by Goldman 1986, Nozick 1981, Lehrer 1974, Williamson 2000, Sosa 1999, and many, many others—is simply to deny that natural possibility (“possible for something to be F”) implies epistemic possibility (“possible that something is F”). According to these philosophers, the fact that it is possible for you to form the beliefs that you currently have in just the way that you formed them,

and yet be wrong in those beliefs, does not imply that, as things actually are, those beliefs are not knowledgeably held. That they could have been wrong does not imply that they could be wrong.

While this “fallibilist” view of knowledge is widely held, it is not obviously correct. If it’s possible for this very belief (say, that I am now typing on a keyboard), formed in the way it has been formed, to be wrong, then why isn’t it possible that this very belief is wrong? Albritton’s analogy with the philanthropic lottery can seem compelling here: since it’s possible for a particular ticket to be a loser, it seems possible that the ticket is a loser. The defenders of fallible knowledge would reply that, even if the analogy to the philanthropic lottery is compelling, what this shows is not that knowledge requires forming one’s belief in a way that could not have gone wrong, but rather it requires forming one’s belief in a way that would not have gone wrong. If one forms one’s belief in a way that is reliable (where this “reliability” condition can be cashed out in a variety of ways that fall short of infallibility), then one’s belief can be knowledgeably held even if fallibly formed. The reason that we cannot know, of the ticket in the philanthropic lottery, that it is a winner is that it is a fair lottery, and so one could just as easily (even if not just as probably) lose as win. It’s not the case (the fallibilist will say) that if one had bought a ticket one would have won: it’s only true that if one had bought a ticket one would probably have won. And the latter modal condition is weaker than the former. So—the fallibilist concludes—to explain why the ticket holder in the philanthropic lottery cannot know of his ticket that it is a winner, we need not impose any condition on knowledge that is stronger than the former condition.

So the lottery example does not dispose of fallibilism. But there is another consideration that may seem to tell against fallibilism. Suppose, for reductio, that S has fallible knowledge that p. Suppose also that S’s belief that p is based upon some

grounds g , and S knows that this is so, and knows that g are good (albeit fallible) grounds for believing that p . In that case, S is in a position to know (by the closure of knowledge under known consequence from two known premises) that her grounds g are not misleading with respect to the truth of p . In other words, S must be in a position to know that, though it is possible for g to be true while p is false, that possibility does not obtain. But how could S be in a position to know this whenever she knows that p while knowing that her grounds for believing that p are fallible? In the absence of a satisfying answer to this question, we may conclude that the original supposition—viz., that S has fallible knowledge that p —cannot be true, and so fallibilism about knowledge is false.

Even if fallibilism is false, this does not show that the skeptical argument from fallibility succeeds. For there is another possible response to the argument from fallibility, and that is Albritton's own response, namely, that many of our beliefs are formed in a way that is not fallible. It simply is not possible for those beliefs, formed as they were, to be false, even if other beliefs formed in apparently similar ways actually were, or are, false. (In order to avoid the generality problem, we should specify that, when we here speak of "the way" in which a belief was formed, we mean to be describing those features of its fixation that are relevant to the epistemic status of the belief.) Epistemological disjunctivists like McDowell adopt this anti-skeptical strategy when they claim that knowledgeably held beliefs are only those that register the fact that they represent: a belief may seem to the believer to do this without actually doing it, but any belief that fails to do this is not knowledgeably held, however it seems to the subject. So, on this "infallibilist" view, a knowledgeably held belief is one that is formed in a distinctive way, and the way it is formed is such that no false belief can be formed in that way.

5b. Responses to the Argument from Underdetermination

The most common response to the argument from underdetermination involves the claim that, even if our perceptual evidence is logically consistent with skeptical hypotheses, it nonetheless provides evidence against those hypotheses in favor of our commonsensical beliefs about the external world, and that is because, even if skeptical hypotheses can be constructed that do explain that perceptual evidence, our commonsensical beliefs about the external world provide a much better explanation of that same perceptual evidence. Why is this? Some philosophers have argued that our commonsensical beliefs about the external world provide a simpler or more ontologically or ideologically parsimonious explanation. But it seems that the skeptic can rebut these claims by designing her competing hypothesis to be as simple and as parsimonious as our commonsensical beliefs about the external world.

Vogel (1990), however, points out an important difference between the former (which he calls the “computer skeptical hypothesis,” or CSH) and the latter (which he calls the “real world hypothesis,” or RWH). The RWH explains our perceptual evidence by appeal to the locations of objects, the CSH explains that same evidence by appeal to some property analogous to location—call it “pseudo location.” Much of the RWH’s explanatory power depends on the necessary truth that no two material objects can occupy the same location at the same time. If the CSH is to enjoy all the explanatory success of the RWH, it will need to appeal to some analogous principle, i.e., that no two causes of our perceptual evidence can occupy the same “pseudo location” at the same time. But either the CSH explains this analogous principle or it doesn’t. If it does, then the CSH explanation of our perceptual evidence is more complicated. If it doesn’t, then the CSH explanation of our perceptual evidence is not as deep or powerful. Either way,

the CSH explanation of our perceptual evidence is not as good as the RWH explanation (Vogel 1990: 664–665).

While Vogel may have succeeded in showing that the skeptic cannot provide the best explanation of our perceptual evidence, this rebuts the argument from underdetermination only when that argument is understood as assuming that our ordinary beliefs about the external world do provide some explanation of our perceptual evidence, where the latter is accessible to us in terms that don't presuppose the existence of an external world. But that assumption has been challenged by Neta (2004), who argues that the “explanatory gap” that has been raised, e.g., by Levine (1983) and Chalmers (1996), as a problem for explanations of conscious phenomenology in terms of physical processes poses a challenge to any attempt to explain our perceptual evidence, understood in terms that don't have any commitments to the existence of an external world, by appeal to any physical events or processes. A way to put this worry is that, even if the skeptic cannot provide a good explanation of our perceptual evidence, so conceived, neither can our ordinary beliefs about the external world. The latter can explain our perceptual evidence only insofar as such evidence is described in terms that do presuppose the existence of external things, e.g., as perceptual relations to external things. In other words, the solution to this problem of underdetermination demands that we think of our perceptual evidence in terms that presuppose the existence of external things. But in that case this “response” to the skeptical problem of underdetermination is no response at all.

5c. Responses to the Argument from Closure

Though many philosophers have attempted to rebut the argument from closure, nothing close to consensus has been achieved on the correct reply. One common line of reply,

issued by Nozick (1981) and Dretske (1971), among others, is simply to deny that knowledge is closed under known implication. Nozick and Dretske each develop an account of knowledge that has as a consequence that knowledge is not closed under known implication. According to Dretske, S knows that p only if S's belief that p is based on conclusive grounds for p, where grounds for p are conclusive just in case S would not have those grounds if p were not true. According to Nozick, S knows that p if and only if (a) S believes that p by means of some method M, and (b) S would not believe that p by means of M if p were not true, and (c) S would believe that p by means of M if p were true. Nozick and Dretske each argues for his account by showing that it issues correct verdicts about the various cases that emerged in the post-Gettier literature on knowledge. But one consequence of both of their accounts is that knowledge is not closed under known implication. And this consequence, as Kripke (2011) has pointed out, is not easy to accept. Consider, for instance, the following example: you see a carpet store's truck pull up into your neighbor's driveway, and the delivery people bring a new red carpet out of the truck and into your neighbor's home. If your neighbors had not bought a new red carpet, they would have bought a blue carpet, and you would have seen it (just as you are now seeing the red one), and so would not have believed that they bought a red carpet. On both Dretske's and Nozick's account, you know that your neighbors just bought a new red carpet. But suppose that, if your neighbors had not bought a carpet, they would have paid delivery people to drive the carpet store's truck into their driveway and unload a new red carpet into their home anyway, just for display purposes, and in order to fool you and their other neighbors into thinking that they bought a carpet. Then, on both Dretske's and Nozick's account, you do not know that your neighbors just bought a carpet. So, by Dretske's and Nozick's lights, this is a situation in which you know (by looking) that your neighbors have just bought a new

red carpet, but you do not know that they have bought a carpet. The implausibility of this consequence damages any attempt to rebut the argument from closure by rejecting the closure principle.

Another way to rebut the argument from closure, without rejecting the closure principle, is to reject the premise that we cannot know that the skeptic's hypothesis is false. On this view, defended by Sosa (1999), Williamson (2000), Wright (2004), Lehrer (1974), Pritchard (2005), Byrne (2004), and others, for any hypothesis that the skeptic designs—any hypothesis the falsity of which is obviously implied by the claims about the external world that we ordinarily take ourselves to know, and according to which our perceptual experiences are just as they actually are—we know that the hypothesis is false. Of course, this position raises two questions. First, how is it that we manage to know that the skeptic's hypothesis is false? (For instance, how do I manage to know that I am not a brain in a vat being electrochemically stimulated to have the very experiences that I've been having?) And second, why are so many philosophers tempted into making (what is, by the lights of this position) the mistake of thinking that we do not know the skeptic's hypothesis to be false?

The first question tends to be answered in one of two ways. Externalists like Sosa and Williamson take it that our knowledge of the falsity of the skeptic's hypothesis does not require us to be able to justify our belief that the skeptic's hypothesis is false: all that such knowledge requires is our bearing the relevant modal relation to the fact that we are not (say) mere brains in vats. In contrast, internalists like Wright and Pryor (2000) take it that our knowledge of the falsity of the skeptic's hypothesis—or, at least, our internalist justification or warrant for believing that the hypothesis is false—is based on some considerations that are available to us upon reflection. (Wright and Pryor hold very different views about what those considerations are: Wright takes them to be non-

empirical considerations concerning what sorts of things we must accept if we are to be rationally successful at all, and Pryor takes them to be empirical.)

The second question has been answered in many different ways. Sosa, for example, thinks that the following true principle

S knows that p only if it would not easily happen that S falsely believes that p

is easily confused with the following false principle

S knows that p only if S would not believe that p if p were false.

While the false principle implies that we do not know the falsity of the skeptic's hypothesis, the true principle has no such implication. Nonetheless, since we confuse the two principles, we also are confusedly led to the view that we do not know the falsity of the skeptic's hypothesis.

Roush (2010) has a different diagnosis: the skeptic's hypotheses are typically ambiguous. On one reading, they are incompatible with the claims that we ordinarily take ourselves to know, but we can easily know that they are false. On the other reading, they are not incompatible with the claims that we ordinarily take ourselves to know. For instance, I ordinarily take myself to know that I have hands. But is the claim that I have hands inconsistent with my being a brain in vat? Of course not: that hypothesis leaves it open that I am a brain in a vat with hands!

But there is yet another diagnosis of why so many philosophers have been tempted into the view that we do not know the skeptic's hypotheses to be false, and this other diagnosis forms the basis of a third way of rebutting the argument from closure.

According to this diagnosis, our attributions of knowledge are held to different standards in different situations. And while our ordinary positive attributions of knowledge cannot be correct relative to the strictest standards of knowledge, they can be correct relative to the more relaxed standards that govern our everyday talk and thought. This view can be fleshed out in different ways, depending on whether the variation in standards is taken to be a variation in the truth-conditions of our ordinary knowledge-attributing sentences (as DeRose (1995), Lewis (1996), Cohen (1988), Schaffer (2005), Neta (2002), and Blome-Tillmann (2014) would say) or whether it is instead a variation in the acceptability of asserting our ordinary knowledge-attributing sentences (as Fogelin (1994), Williamson (2000), Stanley (2005), and Turri (2010) would say). This way of rebutting the argument from closure accepts the closure principle outright, and then takes our ordinary claims to knowledge to be true and/or acceptable only relative to standards that are less than fully strict. Even if some version of this view is correct—and it is controversial that any version of it is (see Reed (2009), for opposition)—it's not clear to what extent skepticism about the external world is committed to denying this view. Perhaps this sort of view should be thought of not so much as a rebuttal of the argument from closure, but rather as an attempt to show how the skeptical conclusion of that argument can be understood in a way that doesn't impugn the positive knowledge attributions that we ordinarily issue.

5d. Responses to the Argument from Dogmatism

By far the most common response to the argument from dogmatism was the one originally issued by Harman (1973): we can know that p even if we cannot rationally disregard apparent counterevidence to p , but that is because when we gain apparent counterevidence to p , we thereby lose our knowledge. According to this popular view,

knowledge that p does rationally permit the knower to disregard apparent counterevidence to p , but if and when such counterevidence comes into view, then the subject ceases to know, and is no longer rationally permitted to ignore that counterevidence. For example, suppose that I know, on the basis of testimony, that the current American Secretary of State is John Kerry. Then, so long as I continue to know that fact, I am rationally permitted to ignore evidence to the contrary. For instance, so long as I continue to know that the current American Secretary of State is John Kerry, I am rationally permitted to ignore news reports to the effect that Kerry has suddenly resigned. However, when I hear such news reports, I no longer continue to know that the current American Secretary of State is John Kerry, and so I am no longer rationally permitted to ignore those reports. This view allows that many of the things that we ordinarily take ourselves to know are things that we do know, even if we are not rationally permitted to ignore apparent counterevidence to them.

The problem with this view has been pointed out recently by Maria Lasonen-Aarnio (forthcoming). Let's grant, she says, that knowledge that p does rationally permit one to ignore counterevidence to p . Let's also grant, as seems immensely plausible, that it's possible to know that p is true when the balance of one's evidence provides very compelling support for p , even if one has a very slight bit of counterevidence to p . Now, in such a case, what should the defender of Harman's view say? Should she say that, since the subject continues to know that p despite having some slight counterevidence to p , she is rationally permitted to ignore her very slight counterevidence to p ? That seems implausible: rationality requires us to distribute our credence in light of all our relevant evidence, and it should not matter whether that evidence comes in all at once, or the positive evidence all comes in first (to give us knowledge) and only later does the very slight negative evidence come in. So should the

defender of Harman's view instead say that knowledge is lost as soon as the knower acquires even the slightest bit of counterevidence to *p*? That also seems implausible: presumably, it's possible to know things even without being absolutely certain of them, and it's also possible to continue to know things of which we were absolutely certain even once we acquire evidence that rationally requires us to be only ever so slightly less than absolutely certain of them. So the defender of Harman's view cannot explain why someone who knows that *p* is not rationally permitted to ignore even very slight counterevidence to *p*, counterevidence the possession of which is consistent with their knowing that *p*.

But if the Harman response to the skeptical argument from dogmatism does not work, then how can we reply to that argument? Another line of reply is implicit in the view of McDowell (1982), who grants that knowledge is indefeasible: when you do know that *p*, you are rationally permitted to ignore counterevidence to *p*, and your knowledge is not defeated by your obtaining such counterevidence. Part of why this reply is so unorthodox is that it seems, on the face of it, implausible to claim that our ordinary knowledge can never be defeated by counterevidence. Can I not lose my knowledge that John Kerry is the current American Secretary of State if I come to hear seemingly credible news reports that he has resigned and been replaced? Suppose I do come to hear such news reports, and then learn, on the basis both of those reports and subsequent corroboration, that Kerry has in fact resigned and been replaced: what would I say then about my earlier claim to know that John Kerry is the current American Secretary of State? I would say that I only thought I knew, but I did not really know. Now suppose that I come to hear these same news reports, and then have not yet corroborated them but am still investigating, and so am no longer sure what to believe: what would I say then about my earlier claim to know that John Kerry is the current

American Secretary of State? Once again, I would say that I thought I knew, but I did not really know. On McDowell's view, this later claim is exactly right. What happens when I gain sufficient counterevidence to p is not that I cease to know that p, but rather I learn that I do not, and did not, know that p. If you know that p, then you will not gain evidence that would make it rational to doubt that p. If you do gain such evidence, then you did not know that p. (We are assuming here that p is a proposition the truth of which is constant over time.) Fortunately for our epistemic position, many of the things that we ordinarily take ourselves to know are never put in doubt by counterevidence.

6. Conclusion: How the Very Idea of the External World Can Generate Skeptical Worries

What all four of the skeptical arguments above have in common is that they include premises the plausibility of which depends on the thought that external things are the way they are independent of how they perceptually appear to us: that's why the beliefs that we form on the basis of those appearances can be false, why our beliefs about external things are underdetermined by our perceptual evidence, why we cannot know that we're not receiving those appearances in the way described by some skeptical hypothesis, and why we cannot rationally disregard apparent counterevidence to our beliefs about external things.

But notice that, while it follows from Moore's characterization of external things that such things can be as they are without being perceived, it does not follow from that characterization that our perceptual states can be as they are without external things. It is easy to confuse these two thoughts, but they are not logically equivalent. We can accept the first thought, but reject the second. In this section, I canvass three famous attempts to do this, and thereby to undermine skepticism about the external world.

According to the “content externalism” defended by Putnam (1981), the contents of our mental representations are metaphysically determined by the causal relations that we bear to features of our environment. It is only because we spend our lives in causal contact with water that so many of our thoughts are about water. Our doppelgangers on Twin Earth, who spend their lives in causal contact with a substance that is perceptually indistinguishable, but distinct, from water, have mental representations that are about that distinct substance, and not about water. Thus, on Putnam’s view, there is a metaphysical limit to how wrong our beliefs about the external world can be, and that limit is imposed by the fact that the contents of those beliefs depends on facts about the external world. More specifically, as Putnam put it: “If we can consider whether [the hypothesis that we are brains in vats being electrochemically stimulated to have the very experiences that we’ve had] is true or false, then it is not true... Hence it is not true” (Putnam 1981: 8).

Davidson (1984) argues for a form of psychological externalism by appeal to the premises that (i) what we think is just what the method of radical interpretation, when ideally executed in application to all of our observable behavior, would claim that we think, and (ii) the method of radical interpretation delivers the result that most of the interpreter’s beliefs are true by the lights of the interpreter, and (iii) an omniscient being could, in principle, execute the method of radical interpretation. From these three principles it follows that, for any particular thinker, what they think is just what the omniscient interpreter would claim (on the basis of radical interpretation) that they think, and most of those beliefs would be true by the lights of the omniscient interpreter. But what is true by the lights of an omniscient interpreter is true. Therefore, for any particular thinker, most of her beliefs are true. This could only be the case if the external

world were at least very roughly the way we believe it to be. Therefore, the external world is at least very roughly the way we believe it to be.

Both Putnam's content externalism and Davidson's psychological externalism impose a metaphysical limit to how wrong our beliefs about the external world can be, but this limit is consistent with various narrow skeptical hypotheses (e.g., five minutes ago I made the transition from being a normally embodied human to being a brain in a vat). In contrast, on McDowell's disjunctivist view, it's true not only that our representations depend globally on some features of the external world; it's also true that particular representations depend on particular features of the external world. For instance, when I look at my hands in the clear light of day, I see my hands, and when I see my hands, I have a perceptual experience that is different in kind from any perceptual experience that I could have if I did not have hands. It's true that I could have a convincing hallucination as of having hands: in such a case, I would falsely believe myself to be seeing my hands. It might also be true that when I dream about, or imagine, my hands, I falsely believe myself to be seeing my hands. Nonetheless, when I do in fact see my hands, I can know, simply by reflecting on my perceptual state itself, that I'm seeing my hands and not merely dreaming, imagining, or hallucinating them. On this disjunctivist view, while it can still be true that external things (like my hands) can exist without being perceived, it's not true that I could occupy my current perceptual states (my current seeing of my hands) without the existence of the perceived external things. If this disjunctivist view is correct, then we can grant the skeptic that knowledge of the external world requires infallibility, no underdetermination, closure under known implication, and indefeasibility, but still deny that the skeptic can gain any mileage from these requirements.

References

- Albritton, Rogers. 2011. "On a Sceptical Argument from Possibility." In E. Sosa and E. Villanueva (eds.), The Epistemology of Perception, Philosophical Issues 21. Wiley: Boston and Oxford, 1 - 24.
- Armstrong, David. 1973. Belief, Truth and Knowledge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Austin, J.L. 1961. "Other Minds." In Philosophical Papers. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 76 - 116.
- Ayer, A.J. 1956. The Problem of Knowledge. London: Hammondsworth.
- Berkeley, George. 1975. Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, ed. P.H. Nidditch. London and Melbourne: Everyman's Library.
- Blome-Tillman, Michael. 2014. Knowledge and Presuppositions. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BonJour, Laurence. 1985. The Structure of Empirical Knowledge. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brueckner, Anthony. 1994. "The Structure of the Skeptical Argument," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 54: 827–835.
- Byrne, Alex. 2004. "How Hard Are the Skeptical Paradoxes?" Noûs 38: 299–325.
- Chalmers, David. 1996. The Conscious Mind. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chisholm, Roderick. 1982. "The Problem of the Criterion." In his The Foundations of Knowing. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 61 - 75.
- Cohen, Stewart. 1988. "How to be a Fallibilist." In J. Tomberlin (ed.), Philosophical Perspectives 2: Epistemology. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 91 - 123.
- Davidson, Donald. 1984. "Belief and its Basis in Meaning." In his Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 141 – 54.

- DeRose, Keith. "Solving the Skeptical Problem," Philosophical Review 104: 1–51.
- Descartes, Rene. 1993. Meditations on First Philosophy, trans. D. Cress. Hackett: Indianapolis, IN.
- Dretske, Fred. 1971. "Conclusive Reasons," Australasian Journal of Philosophy 49: 1–22.
- . 1981. Knowledge and the Flow of Information. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.
- Fogelin, Robert. 1994. Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification. Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York.
- Ginet, Carl. 1980. "Knowing Less by Knowing More." In P. French, T. Uehling, and H. Wettstein (eds.), Midwest Studies in Philosophy V: Epistemology. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 151 – 61.
- Goldman, Alan. 1988. Empirical Knowledge. University of California Press: Berkeley.
- Goldman, Alvin. 1986. Epistemology and Cognition. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.
- Harman, Gilbert. 1973. Thought. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ.
- Kripke, Saul. 2011. "Nozick on Knowledge." In his Collected Papers, Volume 1. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Lasonen-Aarnio, Maria. Forthcoming. "The Dogmatism Puzzle," Australasian Journal of Philosophy.
- Lehrer, Keith. 1974. Knowledge. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Levine, Joseph. 1983. "Materialism and qualia: The explanatory gap," Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 64: 354–361.
- Lewis, David. 1996. "Elusive Knowledge," Australasian Journal of Philosophy 74: 549–567.

- Locke, John. 1975. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. P.H. Nidditch.
Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Lycan, William. 1988. Judgment and Justification. Cambridge University Press:
Cambridge.
- McDowell, John. 1982. "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge," Proceedings of the
British Academy 68: 455–479.
- McDowell, John. 1994. Mind and World. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.
- Moore, G.E. 1959a. "Certainty." In Moore 1959d, 223 – 46.
- . 1959b. "Proof of an External World." In Moore 1959d, 126 – 48.
- . 1959c. "Four Forms of Scepticism." In Moore 1959d, 193 – 222.
- . 1959d. Philosophical Papers. New York: Collier.
- Neta, Ram. 2002. "S Knows that P," Noûs 36: 663–681.
- . 2003. "Contextualism and the Problem of the External World," Philosophical
and Phenomenological Research 66: 1–31.
- . 2004. "Skepticism, Abductivism, and the Explanatory Gap," Philosophical
Issues, volume 14, E. Sosa and E. Villanueva (eds.): 296 - 325.
- Nozick, Robert. 1981. Philosophical Explanations. Harvard University Press:
Cambridge, MA.
- Plato. 1976. Meno, trans. G. Grube. Hackett: Indianapolis, IN.
- Pritchard, Duncan. 2005. Epistemic Luck. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Pryor, James. 2000. "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," Noûs 34: 517–549.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1981. Reason, Truth, and History. Cambridge University Press:
Cambridge.
- Reed, Baron. 2009. "A New Argument for Skepticism," Philosophical Studies 142: 91 –
104.

- Roush, Sherrilyn. 2010. "Closure on Skepticism." Journal of Philosophy 107: 243 – 56.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1957. "The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics." In his Mysticism and Logic. Anchor Books: Garden City, NY, 140 - 73.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1959. The Problems of Philosophy. Oxford Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. 2005. "Contrastive Knowledge," Oxford Studies in Epistemology 1: 235 – 71.
- Sextus Empiricus. 1996. Outlines of Pyrrhonism, trans. by Benson Mates. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sosa, Ernest. 1999. "How to Defeat Opposition to Moore." In J. Tomberlin, Philosophical Perspectives 13: Epistemology,. Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 141 - 53.
- Stanley, Jason. 2004. Knowledge and Practical Interests. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stroud, Barry. 1984. The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Turri, John. 2010. "Epistemic Invariantism and Speech Act Contextualism," Philosophical Review 119: 77–95.
- Unger, Peter. 1975. Ignorance. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Vogel, Jonathan. 1990. "Cartesian Scepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation," Journal of Philosophy 87: 658–666.
- Williams, Michael. 2001. The Problems of Knowledge. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williamson, Timothy. 2000. Knowledge and its Limits. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, Crispin. 2004. "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free?)," Aristotelian Society Supplement 78: 167–212.