

Complete Radical Skepticism

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Many contemporary philosophers believe that skeptical arguments are important as they reveal flaws in our reasoning, the removal of which helps us to fine tune ‘good’ epistemology. However, few, if any, seem to take the position of skepticism seriously, at least as a potential position to hold. In the following pages, I will try to lay out why I take skepticism seriously, why I cannot escape it and why my ignorance may have some significance for other philosophers.

The skepticism that I wish to defend is best described as a complete form of radical skepticism, hereafter referred to as radical skepticism or just skepticism. By ‘complete’ I mean that there is no belief or belief-forming process that is immune from its skeptical doubts, including the skeptical doubts themselves. A proponent of this form of skepticism is unable to find any way to give any belief at any time the status of being rational.

Before I can proceed with the argument which has led me to skepticism, I must first offer a disclaimer as to the method with which this paper has been written. At no time in this essay, regardless of the wording, is anything said herein considered to be rational by the skeptic. To facilitate ease of communication I will not write every claim in this paper so that half the sentence is worded to avoid making declarative statements. In the pages to follow, the skeptical discussion will often be written in absolutes, such as:

'it is impossible that X' or 'it is the case that Y'. In these instances, as in all others, the radical skeptic does not believe herself to possess any evidence that these propositions or beliefs are even slightly more likely to be true than false. However, the skeptic does possess many beliefs. The skeptic may believe that 'it is impossible that X' or 'it is that case that Y'. She will just believe that these claims are completely irrational. How and why this is the case as well as how this affects the force of the skeptical argument itself will be discussed later.

Chapter 2

The Position of Radical Skepticism

Radical skepticism is the inability of an individual to possess a belief that is rational. This failure to find a rational belief is the result of the radical skeptic's inability to provide the slightest advantage of any belief over any other belief. Formally the radical skeptical argument is as follows:

(P1) If one is to possess a belief that is rational, then that belief would be required to be rationally justified.

(P2) It is impossible to possess a belief that is rationally justified.

(C1) It is impossible to possess a belief that is rational.

Rational Justification

'Rational justification' is the property of a belief being at least slightly more likely to be true than any other conflicting belief.¹ Anything weaker than a rationally justified belief would be an arbitrarily chosen belief. Rational justification so stated can be taken in one of two ways. The first and stronger way is that a belief must be slightly more likely to be true than each and every other conflicting belief that exists. The second way is that a belief must be slightly more likely to be true than at least one other

¹ I have no intention of arguing that this is the correct definition for 'rational justification'. I will just be using this phrase to keep from having to repeat the definition every time I wish to reference this concept. This method of defining will hold true for all definitions offered in this work.

conflicting belief. While the first version of rational justification is the one which I think is required to endorse a belief, I will later argue that neither version can be satisfied.

One further addendum to the nature of rational justification must be made explicit before the skeptical argument is laid out in greater detail: the skeptic is unable to conceive how rational justification could be based on objective probability as opposed to subjective probability. To explain this distinction I will turn to an example. Imagine a bag of marbles containing seven red marbles and three blue marbles. Conditions are such so that a person reaching into the bag has an equal chance of pulling out anyone of the marbles in the bag. The objective probability of pulling out a red marble is 70%. However, it is unlikely that the odds of pulling out a red ball are 70% for an individual who is actually assessing the likelihood of pulling out a red marble. Such a person must take into account the possibility of failures on the myriad of factors that could affect her evidence that she has a 70% chance of pulling out a red marble.

Given the hypothetical situation that I have described, it is stipulated that there is a 70% chance that a person will draw a red marble. However, anyone who is not stipulating the situation will have to consider the possibilities that there are not seven red marbles and three blue marbles in the bag. Now most non skeptics would consider such possibilities to be extremely remote, and for the moment I need not contest such a belief. However, in the stipulated case, the odds are exactly 70%, whereas in the mind of someone actually faced with a bag of marbles, many outside factors would most likely alter one's judgment as to the likelihood of picking a red marble.

Suppose a person, Maria, is shown the bag being filled with ten marbles, seven

red and three blue. Maria calculates correctly that she should have a 70% chance of picking a red marble out of the bag. However, Maria has a slight doubt that perhaps the people controlling this experiment used slight of hand or some other clever deception to alter the bag's contents. As the situation is not stipulated by her mind she has no access to the reality of the contents of the bag apart from her collection of evidence and her cunning. As such, she believes that there is only a 69.5% chance that she will draw a red marble from the bag. (Granted, her mind is not likely to assign a number value to the situation, but her belief will be that there is a slight chance that things are not as they appear.)

There are many different possibilities that could alter the subjective probability that one will pull a red marble from the bag. Whatever force the individual attributes to these possibilities determines that individual's subjective probability of pulling a red marble from the bag. Thus, subjective probability is an assessment of likelihood of an event in a real world situation from the perspective of an individual while objective probability expresses the likelihood of an event given the exact nature of reality. One might question the following version of the aforementioned situation: Maria may have believed that everything was exactly as it appeared. She may have trusted everyone running the experiment completely and viewed the situation as a simple probability calculation. In this situation, her subjective probability would perfectly match the objective probability. But, this does not mean that there is no difference between subjective and objective probability in such a case. In this situation, it just so happens that the values come out the same.

Now that I have explicitly laid out the difference between objective and subjective probability, why does the skeptic believe that subjective probability is all that is used with regard to rational justification? There are two reasons. The first is that it is inconceivable to the skeptic how one could be 100% certain about anything. In order to claim that one was in possession of the objective probability of a situation, then one would be required to be certain that they possessed the right belief about the likelihood of an event. Without this certainty any doubts, no matter how small, will make the estimation of likelihood at least slightly different than the objective probability. As objective probability is an exact number, such doubts show that the individual is using something other than the objective probability. For the purposes of this essay, I will make the impossibility of a person being certain about any belief a tacit assumption. It is not that the skeptic lacks arguments about why certainty seems impossible, but I do not want to draw focus away from other parts of the skeptical argument which are more controversial.

Another reason that the skeptic views the concept of rational justification as the result of subjective probability is that an individual has no access to the objective probability of an event. Even if one believed that the normal human has direct access to all information at all times that enter into a situation, then the problem of mistakes still remains. The skeptic, for one, has numerous memories of mistakes and miscalculations that she has made throughout her life. As such, there is always the question of whether reality will fail to meet one's expectations for a given event. While there is a great deal of overlap between this reason and the first, I believe that this distinction, while subtle

merits stating.

Having argued that subjective probability is the only way on which rational justification can be understood to function, I would like to say that I believe that the skeptical argument would also work if, in fact, objective probability is the way that we should cash out rational justification. In fact, I believe that asking for objective probability makes the escape from the skeptical argument even more elusive. However, such a thing is not to be argued for in this work. If objective probability still seems like an option for rational justification in your minds, then view this work as the argument for only the horn of subjective probability.

Rational

The word 'rational', independent of the phrase 'rational justification', also requires a moment of consideration before I can continue. The word 'rational' refers to a process or state of being in which one has some reason or evidence of a specific level, above arbitrary choice, which meets or surpasses the threshold for something being epistemically useful to the individual. There may exist philosophers who want a higher degree of likelihood of truth before saying that a belief is 'rational', but a higher degree would still require the above assumption. The radical skeptic does not argue that being at least slightly more likely to be true than false is a sufficient condition for a rational belief. She argues merely that it is a necessary condition.

Knowledge

As far as the attainability of 'knowledge', the radical skeptic has no opinion. The radical skeptic does not take a position as to what is the proper concept or definition of the word 'knowledge'. Under some forms of the word 'knowledge' the skeptic may well possess such a trait. If, for example, knowledge was any true belief, or any belief that meets the externalist requirements for knowledge, then the radical skeptic may well possess such beliefs. However, the radical skeptic can find no form of 'knowledge' attainable that contains the property of being a rationally justified belief, and she is unable to conceive how any form of 'knowledge' can be useful to the 'knower' that lacks the property of being a rationally justified belief. I will say more about this in chapter four.

The Argument Outlined

Now that the major terms of the argument have been spelled out, I will proceed with the articulation of the argument. The radical skeptic cannot find a way to view any belief as being rational without beginning with the assumption that rational justification is a necessary condition for the possession of a rational belief. The aforementioned assumption is the first premise of the radical skeptical argument. Whenever the skeptic tries to accept something as being true or even more likely to be true than any other alternative, then the aforementioned premise is required of her.

The second premise of the skeptical argument is that it is impossible to satisfy the requirement of rational justification for any belief. The radical skeptic is unable to find

any evidence for any belief to be considered even slightly more likely to be true than any alternative. A sub argument of the skeptical argument will be used to reveal the skeptics reasoning in this matter. The formalization of this sub argument is as follows:

(P3) If one is to possess a belief (A) [which can be any belief] that is rationally justified, then the belief (B) [that one's mental abilities which determine belief (A) are at least slightly more likely than not to produce rationally justified beliefs] must be rationally justified

(P4) The belief (B) cannot be rationally justified.

(C2) One cannot possess a belief (A) that is rationally justified.

The phrase 'mental abilities' refers to all processes, functions or states of being which think, feel, believe, sense, intuit or assume for an individual entity. This list of processes is meant to cover everything that an individual has at her disposal to give evidence to the likelihood of a belief. While I may have left something off the list that someone might believe can offer evidence for rational belief, I would be surprised if it failed to follow the same reasoning which the skeptic offers for those listed above.

It is unclear to the skeptic how any belief (A) could be obtained by an individual that does not require that individual's mental abilities to be responsible for the belief (A). If an individual's mental abilities are responsible for any belief (A), then, whether an individual realizes it or not, the likelihood that the belief (A) is true is dependent on the likelihood that the individual's mental abilities are going to produce rationally justified beliefs. As a result, if one is to possess a belief (A) that is rationally justified, then the belief (B) [that one's mental abilities which determine belief (A) are at least slightly more

likely than not to produce rationally justified beliefs] must be rationally justified. This claim is (P3) of the sub argument.

It is also unclear to the skeptic how belief (B) could be rationally justified, (P4). For belief (B) to be rationally justified one would have to use the mental abilities themselves to determine if the mental abilities were likely to produce rationally justified beliefs. In order to be rationally justified in trusting the results of one's mental abilities, to determine their own likelihood at producing rationally justified beliefs, then one would need to know the answer to this determination in order to calculate it. The skeptic cannot see how this circular reasoning could yield a rationally justified belief (B).

The Nature of the Position

What are the implications and addenda of the skeptical argument? The skeptic believes that the argument which leads one to radical skepticism is no more justified or likely to be true than any of the claims that the skeptical argument attacks. As such, the radical skeptic believes that the argument which has convinced her to become a skeptic is in fact not rationally justified. In other words, the radical skeptic does not take the view espoused by some philosophers, such as Peter Unger², who claim that we can be rationally justified in believing that rational justification is impossible.

Radical skepticism does not argue that someone could not be rationally justified or even certain with regards to the truth of a proposition or belief; it is merely the failure of an individual to understand how a rationally justified belief or proposition could be

² Unger, Peter. Ignorance: The Case for Skepticism. Oxford University Press. Oxford, UK. (1975).

obtained. It does not claim that other people, if they exist, do not possess rationally justified beliefs or even certainty with regard to a belief or proposition. The skeptic is in no position to judge such a question. Perhaps what is most disturbing and difficult to comprehend, even for the skeptic herself, is that she is unable to be rationally justified in the belief that she is not rationally justified in a belief or all beliefs. In other words, the skeptic may be rationally justified in some or all of her beliefs and in some way be lying to herself or some other event may be occurring, the particulars of which I am unable to explain or conceive. Such an event may cause the skeptic to believe that she is not rationally justified in a belief(s) when in fact she is rationally justified in said belief(s).

Radical skepticism views the skeptical argument as the destroyer of any beliefs. If one accepts its premises and basic logic, then one would be forced to accept its conclusion. The radical skeptic does not accept the premises of the skeptical argument as being rationally justified or rational, but if she tries to rationally justify any proposition or be rationally justified in holding any belief, then the premises of the skeptical argument are required or entailed within accepting said proposition or belief. The radical skeptic who strives for rationally justified beliefs is not unlike a carpenter trying to build something which always collapses before it can be finished.

The radical skeptic may possess beliefs, but the beliefs would not be rationally justified and thus are irrational to the skeptic. The skeptic may exist day to day with strong psychological belief in the probability of truth or even psychological certainty of some beliefs. However, the psychological confidence one possesses with regard to a

belief or proposition does not carry any weight for the skeptic with regard to the likelihood of the truth of said belief or proposition, at least not until such a mental state can be justified.

The skeptic can therefore believe that she cannot fly with near psychological certainty, and at the same time lack rational justification for the belief that she cannot fly. The skeptic should not be thought as believing two conflicting things in this example. If the skeptic does not jump off of a roof for fear of dying, then this does not mean that she believes herself to be rationally justified in her belief that she would die by jumping off of the building. She merely possesses a belief which is not rationally justified and therefore carries no epistemic value to the skeptic. She may possess many beliefs, hopes and fears which dictate her actions; they would just be viewed as irrational by the skeptic.

Chapter 3

Defense of the Radical Skeptical Argument

The radical skeptic is unable to produce a useful criterion to endorse a belief as being rational which does not require the acceptance of the skeptical argument as well. The skeptic cannot see a way to attain a rational belief that avoids the two premises of the skeptical argument. As a result, the discussion in defense of the skeptical argument will focus on why the first and second premises are unavoidable.

(P1) If one is to possess a belief that is rational, then that belief would be required to be rationally justified.

(P2) It is impossible to possess a belief that is rationally justified.

(C1) It is impossible to possess a belief that is rational.

In order to avoid the first premise of the radical skeptical argument one would need to find an example of a rational belief that does not meet the criteria of rational justification. The impossibility of something being rational and not rationally justified seems required given the definitions of rational and rational justification. It is beyond the skeptic's ability to understand the concept of a belief being rational which is not even a fraction of a percent more likely to be true than other alternative. Thus, the skeptic is unable to conceive of a rational belief that does not have rational justification as a necessary condition. Radical skeptics have no argument for the unavoidability of the first premise apart from the nonexistence of a counterexample and their own inability to even

conceive of how the first premise could fail to be true. Given this, most of the defense of the radical skeptical argument will focus on premise two.

The reasoning behind the second premise of the radical skeptical argument will be discussed in much more detail than the first, as it is less straightforward in its unavoidability. The radical skeptic does not comprehend how this second premise can be avoided due to the skeptic's dependence on her mental abilities. To reveal this we turn to the sub argument for (P2).

(P3) If one is to possess a belief (A) [which can be any belief] that is rationally justified, then the belief (B) [that one's mental abilities which determine belief (A) are at least slightly more likely than not to produce rationally justified beliefs] must be rationally justified.

(P4) The belief (B) cannot be rationally justified.

(C2) One cannot possess a belief (A) that is rationally justified.

Premise Three

The radical skeptic is unable to avoid (P3) because of her dependence on her mental abilities in all belief forming processes. The skeptic cannot conceive how a rationally justified belief can be formed that is not the direct result of an individual's mental abilities. Specifically, any judgment with regard to a beliefs likelihood of being true must be the direct result of an individual's mental abilities.

An individual's beliefs can be divided into two exhaustive groups: internal beliefs and external beliefs. Internal beliefs are beliefs that are evaluated by the individual's

mental abilities to determine if the belief is rationally justified. External beliefs are beliefs that come from some source outside of one's mental abilities and are not evaluated by the receiving individual's mental abilities. As internal beliefs are defined as being equivalent to beliefs that are evaluated by an individual's mental abilities, then external beliefs can be understood as covering every possible alternative to a belief's evaluation being dependent on mental abilities. If an external belief cannot create a rationally justified belief for an individual, then internal beliefs will be the only possible way to form a rationally justified belief. Therefore, the argument to follow will focus on why external beliefs cannot form rationally justified beliefs for an individual.

What is the nature of an external belief? Possible candidates for the origins of an external belief could be a computer that always produces true beliefs, another being placing beliefs into our minds, etc. What such origins have in common is the notion that a belief can be rationally justified and then transferred to an individual retaining its rationally justified status. However, it is inconceivable to the skeptic how such a belief could be transferred to an individual and retain its rationally justified status.

While beliefs may have been rationally justified by whoever or whatever possessed the beliefs before transmitting them to the individual, this is no reason to believe that the beliefs are rationally justified to the individual who receives them. Even if a person, god or computer could possess absolute certainty with regard to the truth or falsity of a belief, it would still be inconceivable how this person could transfer this certainty to someone else. Such a method of transference may in fact be possible,

however, such a method is beyond the skeptic's understanding, and she is aware of no such process having occurred for herself.

All beliefs, regardless of the evidence possessed concerning their likelihood of being true, possess the same likelihood of being true to the individual who does not judge for themselves whether the beliefs, or the source of the beliefs, are rationally justified. In other words, while a computer may exist that always produces true beliefs, the individual, lacking judgment of her own, who relies on this computer as the source of beliefs, and the evaluation of these beliefs, has no way of being rationally justified in the beliefs that the computer produces. If the computer produced nothing but false beliefs, then the individual, lacking the ability to make judgments, would view all beliefs from this computer exactly the same as the individual would view beliefs made from a computer which produces nothing but true beliefs. This also holds true for all combinations of true beliefs and false beliefs that a computer could produce. If the individual cannot tell the difference between a source that always is true, one that is always false or some combination of the two, then the individual could not be rationally justified in the source. The individual in question would have no idea as to the accuracy of the computer's answers and therefore the likelihood of the truth of any belief gained from the computer would be unknown to the individual who lacks her own judgment.

Another option is that the belief, that the computer always produces certainly true beliefs, is transmitted from some source to the individual. However, in order for the receiving individual to have a rationally justified belief that the computer always, or even

likely, produces true results, then the individual would be required to make a judgment as to the likelihood of the truth of this source. This process of pushing back the judgment could go on infinitely, but at some point the individual must make a positive judgment as to the validity of an outside source in order to be rationally justified in any outside source, or the beliefs sent by this source. Therefore, in order for an entity to possess a belief that is rationally justified the individual must judge for themselves whether a belief, or the source of a belief, is rationally justified.

If an individual cannot have a rationally justified belief transferred to that individual, then all rationally justified beliefs must gain their rationally justified status from within the individual who possesses them. Therefore, in order to have a rationally justified belief, the belief must result from an individual's mental abilities. This means that some process or processes within an individual must be able to determine that a belief is at least slightly more likely than not to be true if an individual is to be able to possess rationally justified beliefs.

As a result, an individual's belief (A) will only be as likely to be true to that individual, as least as far as that individual is in a position to judge, as the mental abilities that created belief (A). For example, if Jane has a belief (A) [that the sun will rise tomorrow], then the probability that this belief is true from the perspective of Jane cannot exceed the probability Jane possesses that her mental abilities are likely to produce rationally justified beliefs. If the possibility that Jane's mental abilities are producing rationally justified beliefs is not at least slightly more likely to be true than not, then no

belief that Jane can have will be rationally justified to her.

Even if a process did exist which could form a belief but was not listed in the definition of mental abilities, then such a process would still have the same resulting problem. The problem in question is that the individual must be rationally justified in the belief that the process(es) in question are likely to produce rationally justified beliefs. In this type of case such a process would be synonymous with mental abilities in all relevant ways for this argument. Therefore, the belief (B) [that one's mental abilities which determine belief (A) are at least slightly more likely than not to produce rationally justified beliefs] is required to be rationally justified in order to obtain a rationally justified status for any belief.

Premise Four

The radical skeptic can find no way to avoid (P4) which says that belief (B) cannot be rationally justified. It is impossible to deliberate as to the likelihood of belief (B) without assuming that the belief (B) is rationally justified. The skeptic cannot conceive of how self testing or cross testing one's mental abilities as well as verification from others can lend any help to one's estimations of the likelihood of belief (B). All such attempts to verify belief (B) require mental abilities to make these determinations. As a result, any attempt to consider whether belief (B) is rationally justified begs the question. The skeptic is unable to conceive how an individual's mental abilities can produce a rationally justified belief that the individual's mental abilities are likely to produce rationally justified beliefs. In order for an individual's mental abilities to be able to produce a rationally justified belief that the individual's mental abilities are at least

slightly more likely than not to produce rationally justified beliefs, then circular reasoning would have to be able to produce a belief that was slightly more likely than not to be true. The skeptic cannot conceive how this kind of circular reasoning could lead to a rationally justified belief.

A possible way out of this conundrum is self-testing verification. Unfortunately, it seems impossible to validate the accuracy of something without having something else that is already at least slightly valid to check it against. Anything that tries to verify itself must assume that it is working properly in order to determine the accuracy of the results of its calculations. This means that if one's mental abilities are not functioning in a way that allows for proper interpretation of reality, then it seems possible, if not likely, that one cannot determine this malfunctioning. It is also inconceivable to the skeptic how even properly functioning mental abilities could verify their accuracy as they would only have self-testing as evidence.

One or more mental abilities cross checking another mental ability's accuracy will be of no help for an individual to be rationally justified in belief (B). It could be argued that separate mental abilities, such as reasoning and intuition, could validate each other, but two or more abilities can reach the same conclusion while both are incorrect. Unless one ability is known to work properly first, then they could be falsely verifying themselves just as likely as correctly verifying themselves. Therefore, cross checking mental abilities will not provide us with our goal of showing that a belief is rationally justified.

The belief that other entities exist which could validate one's mental abilities does not increase the likelihood that one's mental abilities are likely to produce rationally

justified beliefs. The notion of appealing to other people or public opinion with regard to belief (B) faces the same problems as the aforementioned problems with forming beliefs from a computer that always produces certain beliefs. All claims from other people that an individual may experience would have to be evaluated by the individual who is sensing them. These claims must be judged as being more likely to be true than not in order to give any epistemic weight to the validity of one's mental abilities. The judgments that must be made in order to establish that the claims being received are rationally justified rely on assuming that the mental abilities can be trusted to derive the answer. Again, the skeptic cannot conceive how such circular reasoning can provide any support for one's mental abilities.

If it cannot be determined that one's mental abilities are at least slightly more likely to produce rationally justified beliefs than not, then one could never know if any belief was more likely to be true than false. All calculations would carry the trait of being unable to calculate rationally justified beliefs resulting from their dependence on the mental abilities that are determining what is being calculated. This is especially true for belief (B) as belief (B) is the belief in the accuracy of the very processes in question. As such, it is inconceivable to the skeptic how belief (B) could be rationally justified.

Chapter 4

Concerns and Additions

Towards the beginning of this endeavor I said that I would later discuss the two different ways that rational justification could be taken. The first and stronger way is that a belief must be slightly more likely to be true than each and every other conflicting belief that exists. The second is that a belief must be slightly more likely to be true than at least one other conflicting belief. I will now discuss why the skeptical argument applies equally to both.

All that has to be shown now is that the weaker version of rational justification is susceptible to the skeptical argument. Clearly, if the weaker cannot be satisfied, then the stronger would also fail to be satisfied. As we have seen, the skeptical argument shows that all beliefs are incapable of being rationally justified. If no belief can be shown to be at least slightly more likely to be true than not, then no belief can be slightly more likely to be true than any other belief. If no belief can be slightly more likely to be true than not, then the weaker, and therefore the stronger, version of rational justification cannot be satisfied.

Another point that was brought up at the beginning of the paper which could use a little clarification and defense is the individual nature of this form of skepticism. As I mentioned earlier, the skepticism under discussion only applies to the individual. The skeptic neither claims that others cannot or do not possess rational justification nor does

she claim that she is rationally justified in the belief that she does not possess rational justification. The skeptic sees no way to rationally distinguish between any two choices.

One might be inclined to question whether anything of philosophical interest follows from one person's incapacities. While the incapacities of a single person might not be of much philosophical interest, the arguments or questions issued by an individual would need to be dealt with by all individuals. The skeptic relays the problems that she has with acquiring rational beliefs, and if these problems are misconceptions on her part, then there would exist rational ways to thwart the arguments that the skeptic offers. If one is unable to provide a rational way around the skeptic's arguments, then it is inconceivable to the skeptic how any beliefs held by the individual can be considered rational.

One may ask why anyone should read the scribblings of skeptics if the skeptics themselves view their own arguments as being irrational. However, it seems to me that the origin of an argument does not influence its soundness. A group of monkeys randomly pushing buttons on a typewriter might create an argument that was perfectly sound. As unlikely as such an origin story may be, it would not affect the cogency of the argument just because it was produced randomly. As such, the rational force of an argument is unaffected by the rational force that the author believes the argument to possess.

The non-skeptic believes that rational beliefs are possible, and as such can weigh the force of the skeptical argument to see if it is rational. If the non-skeptic finds the argument to be rational, then the non-skeptic must find a way to deal with the skeptical

argument. If the argument is believed to be rational and cannot be dealt with, then the non-skeptics rational system will be called into question by the non-skeptic, not the skeptic.

This is not to suggest that the skeptical argument is immune to criticism, far from it. It merely says that the skeptic herself is unconvinced by the argument that she presents. Whenever an attempt is made by the skeptic to rationally believe in something, then the skeptical argument above will make the attempted rational belief crumble in her hands as she tries to rationally endorse it. The skeptical argument does not justify the skeptical position; it merely destroys her attempts to possess positive epistemic positions.

If what is rational is to be more than just opinions, then one cannot merely say that the burden of proof is on the skeptic. The skeptic is not making claims, and as such is not trying to prove anything. It is merely irrational impulses that compel the skeptic to communicate her thoughts. The motivator of the skeptic's thoughts would be irrational simply because the skeptic cannot find a way to believe that any belief is even slightly more likely to be true than any other alternative.

One could argue that the skeptic is unjustly making a leap from "the source must be accurate" to "one must be rationally justified in the belief that the source is accurate". However, the skeptic cannot see a way around the need for both of these statements to be at least slightly more likely to be true than not in order to have any rationally justified beliefs. It is unclear to the skeptic how anyone can be rationally justified in any belief without also being rationally justified in the belief that what is making these judgments is at least slightly more likely to be true. Without knowing that the likelihood that one's judgments are accurate one is completely unable to determine if any other belief is

rationaly justified. This is because if one's mental abilities are completely untrustworthy, then so is every decision that one can make. Therefore, in order to have a rationaly justified belief one must use one's mental abilities to attain the rational justification of that belief, and in order to be rationaly justified in the resulting belief one must first have a rationaly justified belief in the accuracy of said processes.

The Argument Offered by Joe Cruz

In Joe Cruz's unpublished paper "Is there Reason for Skepticism" Cruz argues that all arguments, including skeptical arguments, require epistemic principles. Cruz describes epistemic principles as, "A rule that states the conditions under which a set of inputs (typically mental states like beliefs or perceptions) yields epistemically high-quality output (typically justified belief)."³ Cruz claims that a single epistemic principle is the cause of all of the force that we attribute to skeptical arguments. This epistemic principle is the discriminating evidence principle, or DE: "If S possesses total evidence e, and if e does not discriminate between two or more conflicting conclusions, then it is not rational for S to believe one of those conclusions."⁴ Cruz argues that DE does not hold for skeptical arguments. As the skeptical argument that is put forward in my paper relies heavily on DE, I am inclined to address Cruz's position.

Cruz makes his argument for the failure of DE in skeptical arguments by showing an example of how DE would function in a skeptical argument. I will now repeat his examination of this argument:

³ Cruz, Joe. "Is There Reason for Skepticism?". Forthcoming.

⁴ Ibid.

- (1) I appear to have two hands.
- (2) Therefore, it is reasonable for me to believe that I have two hands.
- (3) I may right now be subject to the deception of an evil genius; therefore it is not reasonable for me to believe that I have two hands.

Where the perceptual principle connection between 1 & 2 was undermined by the DE principle leading to 3. Now, another iteration of DE might offer

- (4) I may be mis-applying DE; therefore, it is not reasonable for me to retract my earlier argument (namely 1 & 2).⁵

According to Cruz, the result of this example is an instance where DE undermines itself. He goes on to argue that a specific condition exists for skeptical arguments which causes the implosion of DE. His argument is that just because DE can be employed in all cases of non-discriminability it does not mean that it has to be so employed. Cruz claims that the implosion of DE shows that unlike all other epistemic principles, DE is not context neutral: “The property had by principles such that they can range over a variety of mental states with differing content.”⁶ The reason for this is that DE undermines itself when confronted with skeptic arguments. As such, he believes that we should create a normative principle which avoids using DE in a context-neutral way; doing so will remove the problem of skepticism.

I have several responses to this argument. The first is that the use of DE on DE does not seem to undermine DE. DE, as I read it, is the inability to accept a conclusion between two or more competing conclusions when equal evidence exists for all those considered. This means that when faced with equal evidence between multiple beliefs

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

the individual should refrain from accepting any of these beliefs. To say that we may have used DE wrong to get to suspension of belief between our choices does not change the conclusion of the initial employment of DE. The result is still we do not possess the evidence that favors either conclusion. A second point that goes with the first is that if one is willing to say that our likelihood of mis-applying DE is the same as the likelihood that we correctly used DE, then one would seem to be committed to the skeptical conclusion of having no way to be rationally justified in our mental abilities.

Even if we accepted Cruz's reasoning, it is not apparent to me why this would hurt the skeptical argument. We would still be in a situation with equal evidence for two competing premises. It would be arbitrary as to which one we consent to, and his proposed normative principle would not show that we had a hand. It would merely say that we do not possess a principle that tells us what to do in a situation of equal evidence involving skepticism. Cruz gives no answer to the question of how do we get from the claim that DE implodes when faced with a skeptical argument to the claim that skepticism is false. The implosion of our reasoning is not removed by the exile of DE. We still have no way to show that one belief is more likely than the other. Without DE we are just free to make an arbitrary choice between them. However, how can making an arbitrary choice be a rational move?

Cruz goes on to say, "It is not as if the skeptic can accept that the content neutral version of DE implodes and treat that as showing that our reasoning is in general bollixed up. The ordinary reasoning that leads to the conclusion that the world is as it appears to be does not employ DE, and stands on its own as yielding a prima facie justified belief."⁷

⁷ Ibid.

However, it seems to me that if content neutral DE does implode the way that Cruz suggests, then the skeptic can claim from this that our reasoning is in general bollixed up. If DE implodes, then the skeptic can say that a major part of our reasoning does seem to fail. Anytime that we reach a situation were two views possess equal evidence and skepticism is involved in one of the views, then we have no rational course of action. Since DE fails in this instance we have no epistemic principle to follow in such an occurrence. As such, all reasoning that follows is irrational.

The question of whether one is rationally justified in any belief is required at least tacitly for every decision making process. If reasoning implodes whenever we deal with the skeptical question and the skeptical question is relevant to all of our decision makings processes⁸, and thereby all of our reasoning, then if DE implodes when faced with skeptical arguments, then our reasoning is generally bollixed up. As for the conclusion that the world is as it appears, the skeptic has many other stories to tell about what we experience that possesses just as much evidence as the world existing as it appears and does not rely on DE: five minute old earth, brains in a vat, etc.

In order to make the skeptical position with regard to Cruz's argument completely clear, I want to turn for a moment to a real world situation in which DE encounters the skeptical question. As it is the contention of my paper that all situations encounter the skeptical question, it should be unimportant as to what kind of scenario is chosen. Given this, I will try to choose an example that is most common in our lives. Therefore, I will just pick up from in the middle of someone's life and examine the next belief about the world that occurs.

⁸ Contextualism disagrees with this claim, but this paper will not address contextualism.

A person is in a grocery store, shopping. She arrives at what she believes to be the produce section. She is searching for oranges which she has previously decided that she wants to buy. She sees a mass of orange spheres in a display. Upon perceiving these shapes she has the sensation that these spheres are the things for which she is searching. Everything that she observes about these spheres triggers the sensation of 'these match the characteristics of an orange'.

Does her belief that these are the oranges that she is looking for engage the skeptical question? Cruz tells us that when the skeptical question is engaged that our reasoning implodes. Therefore, if the skeptical question is engaged in this instance, then our reasoning implodes. This implosion would mean that a rational decision with regard to this instance is impossible.

The skeptic would say that at the very least the skeptical argument is tacitly engaged. The skeptical question asks only that we are correct to believe that a specific belief is at least slightly more likely to be true than false. As all judgments about the likelihood of the truth of any belief asks at least this much, then any judgment requires a decision that requires making a judgment about the skeptical question in order to judge the belief under scrutiny. Therefore, if any judgment asks, "By choosing a specific belief we at least slightly more likely to choice a true belief as opposed to a false one," then that person engages and must satisfy the skeptical question. Unfortunately, all judgments that are considered to be rational must satisfy this minimal requirement.

As I have said towards the beginning of my discussion of skepticism, the skeptic tries to make rationally justified beliefs out of her experiences. However, as she tries to construct them, they always crumble in her hands. I think that if Cruz is right about the

implosion of DE when faced with skeptical arguments, then he has found a truly elegant example of how reasoning can collapse upon itself when dealing with skeptical questions. If my initial arguments persuade you that DE does not lose its force, then the skeptical argument still remains well intact. If DE does lose its force when dealing with skeptical arguments, then it would seem that the skeptical conclusion of this essay is still not harmed by such a result, as reasoning suffers a system error when dealing with the ubiquitously present skeptical question.

Chapter 5

Those who Avoid the Skeptical Argument

As I mentioned earlier, there are some theories of justification which are immune to the skeptical argument previously offered. I now want to argue that any theory that avoids the skeptical argument does so because it is missing a potential requirement for justification, and that any theory without this requirement is committed to a form of skepticism just as serious as the skepticism threatened by the skeptical argument itself. The requirement to which I am referring is access.

I will begin by clarify my use of ‘access’. Once the access requirement is made explicit, I will explain why any theory of justification that avoids the skeptical argument will fail to have an access requirement. The last portion of my argument revolves around showing that any theory that lacks an access requirement is committed to a serious form of skepticism. It is worth noting that if any one of these projects fails, then my entire argument will fail with it.

Access

By ‘access’ I am referring to a type of access internalism. Richard Fumerton defines access internalism as any theory that holds that, “A set of conditions X can constitute your justification for believing P only if you have access to the fact that X

obtains and access to the fact that when X obtains the belief is likely to be true.”⁹ While Fumerton’s definition would work fine for my argument, I would like to try to formulate access in a way that avoids some of the possible pitfalls that Fumerton identifies with this requirement: the threat of an infinite regress and the use of ambiguous/undefined terms such as ‘access’.

I think that a more modest, or perhaps thorough, requirement for access internalism, AC1, is that a set of conditions constitute your justification for believing P only if you have awareness or potential awareness that all other non awareness requirements for justification, whatever they might be, are met, where ‘awareness’ is understood to mean availability to the individual’s conscious thought. By ‘potential awareness’ I mean that upon reflection one would be able to become aware that the requirements for justification are met. While I have intuitions that one must have had actual awareness, as opposed to potential awareness that a class of beliefs are justified before a member of said class can be justified by mere potential awareness, such a claim is not required of my position and would just seek to encumber this discussion.

Fumerton argues that access internalism, as he defines it, may be accused by some of being committed to the KK principle, know that one knows P in order to know P, or the JJ principle, one must be justified in believing that one is justified in believing P in order to be justified in believing P. These principles are common culprits of creating an infinite regress, as one must always know or be justified in something in order to know or

⁹ Fumerton, Richard. *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc. Lanham, Maryland. (1995). Pg. 62-63.

be justified in something else. These principles are possible commitments of access internalism as a result of the ambiguity in what the term 'access' may be cashed out as meaning. It has been argued by some that 'access' boils down to requiring that one must know or be justified in the fact that X obtains in order to know or be justified in P. Cashing 'access' out in this way would commit 'access' to the KK or JJ principle. While there are those who argue that being committed to KK or JJ is not a problem, or that some special beliefs can avoid the KK or JJ principle, AC1 should prove less controversial in its commitments.

In the version of access internalism that I am defending, AC1, one neither has to satisfy the KK principle nor the JJ principle. All that AC1 demands of an individual is that in order to be justified in believing P one must meet the requirements for justification, whatever they might be, and be aware or potentially aware that these conditions are met. AC1 is not threatened by an infinite regress as neither justification nor knowledge is required for awareness or potential awareness that the requirements for justification are met. AC1 is also immune from an AA requirement, where one must be aware that one is aware that the requirements for justification are met in order to be aware that the requirements of justification are met. AC1's immunity to AA is the result of AC1 only requiring that one is aware that the non-awareness requirements are met, as opposed to requiring that one be aware that one is aware of these requirements as well. As a result of this discussion, it should be clear that AC1 is free of regress problems, and hopefully free of ambiguity.

Those who Avoid the Skeptical Argument

The theories of justification/knowledge that avoid the skeptical argument must now be shown to fail to possess an AC1 requirement for justification. This argument will be made by examining the nature of rational justification in the skeptical argument and AC1. I will attempt to show that AC1 limits the believer to her evidence and that rational justification is a judgment about one's evidence. In other words I will argue that to require AC1 will commit us to requiring rational justification, which the skeptical argument casts strong doubt on the possibility of attaining.

What exactly does the AC1 requirement allow us to use as potential requirements for justification? We are, as a result of AC1, left only with requirements that are at the very least potentially available to our conscious experience. I take it that such conscious experiences amount to what is commonly referred as an individual's evidence. While we might possess evidence that objects or properties exist of which we are not aware, such objects or properties would not be things themselves of which we could possess awareness. However, beliefs in external things can be justified according to AC1 if we are aware that our evidence makes the existence of external things likely enough to be considered justified.

It is at this point that the AC1 requirement comes in contact with rational justification. It would seem that if justification is going to require something more than arbitrary choice, then it must require that something can only be justified if the *evidence*

shows us that a belief B is at least slightly more likely to be true than false. To offer an argument that this is false would be to offer an argument against the skeptical argument as well as the resulting implications of AC1. It would then seem that if one were to hold AC1 as a requirement for justification, then one would be under the reach of the skeptical argument.

Externalism

I now want to turn to the objections that would likely be offered by externalists against the skeptical argument/AC1. While this section deals exclusively with the externalist position, some of the externalist concerns will be dealt with in the section to follow. This separation is the result of some concerns being those solely of externalists while others are concerns of both externalists and some internalists.

I take it that that most if not all externalists would argue one of two points against my position: either AC1 is not a good requirement for justification, which I will save for the next section, or at least some external requirements are available to conscious experience. The immediate question that arises from the later option is how can we be aware of external requirements. As all external requirements for justification would seem to be by the definition of 'external' unavailable to an individual's conscious experience, any external requirement would seem to be prohibited by AC1.

The following two arguments are being offered as an exhaustive account of the options available for the externalist who wants to accept AC1 and still avoid the skeptical argument. I will argue that both of these attempts to avoid the skeptical argument while

still accepting AC1 will fail. I will now turn to the arguments in question.

One possible stance that the externalist could take on this point revolves around internal awareness of external requirements based on a causal chain from the external objects to the individual's conscious thought. This causal approach would argue that being aware of the end of the causal chain, the sensations, gives one awareness of the chain itself and therefore, at least in some sense, the external objects on this chain. According to this theory we then have awareness of external things through our awareness of the internal part of the causal chain, our sensations.

This line of reasoning seems counterintuitive. All that the individual would have available to her is the conscious experience of the sensations hypothetically created by the external objects, not the objects themselves. If we equate what it means to be consciously aware of the end of a causal chain, our sensations, to what it is like to see the end of a material piece of chain, where 'see' is understood to mean the folk definition of 'see', then it would seem clear that we can only see the part of the chain that we can see and not any of the chain that is outside of our vision, even if it is connected to the part of the chain that we can see. This seems equally true of conscious experience of the end of a causal chain. Being aware of a part does not somehow give us awareness of the whole, even if the whole exists, as the causal theory suggests. As such, this move seems to encounter serious, if not insurmountable, problems for the externalist.

The only other move that seems open to the externalist who tries to claim that we can possess conscious experiences of external requirements for justification is that of

direct realism. Direct realism is the theory that we can be directly aware of things external to us, as opposed to merely being directly aware of sensations that may or may not be caused by external things, or at least the external things that we believe are causing the sensations. To use the chain example from the last argument, direct realism is the theory that none of the chain is hidden and that we can directly be aware of the external things without having to merely be aware of the sensations that are created by the external things. If the theory of direct realism is true, then it would seem that an individual could have conscious experience of external requirements for justification which would allow the externalist theories to succeed in avoiding the skeptical argument while retaining AC1.

The problem with direct realism solving this problem for the externalist is that the theory of direct realism could be wrong. It is possible that we cannot be directly aware of external objects, and that our awareness is limited to our sensations. The direct realist would need some way to justify the belief that direct realism is true.

The direct realist can counter this objection by employing an externalist move and say that while it may be possible that direct realism is not a correct theory, that we are still justified in believing a belief B, where B is a belief about something that is external to us, if in reality the theory of direct realism is true. However, if the direct realist is committed to the position that we are justified in believing a belief B only if the theory of direct realism is true, then the direct realist has just added a requirement for justification of which one cannot be aware even if direct realism is true; namely that direct realism is true.

The externalist could amend the direct realism argument by claiming that direct realism does not add a condition of justification, as it is not something of which one can be directly aware, but rather something that is justified from the evidence of which one is aware. Once it is justified by the evidence of which one is aware, then it can be used to justify other beliefs such as belief B. Such a claim would remove the teeth of the previous objection to the direct realism argument.

However, this would mean that direct realism will not count as evidence until it is justified by other evidence. As the skeptical argument applies to all judgments, including any judgment that one could make to justify direct realism, this would mean that direct realism would be no help against the skeptical argument. It would therefore seem that the externalist is forced to deny the AC1 requirement if she is going to succeed in avoiding the skeptical argument.

The Skepticism of Unawareness

Assuming that the preceding arguments have successfully shown that one cannot accept AC1 and avoid the skeptical argument, then only one option remains available in order to avoid the skeptical argument: deny AC1. This section will attempt to show that while denying AC1 may avoid the skeptical argument, it will also commit a theory of justification to a form of skepticism which may be as undesirable as the skepticism resulting from the skeptical argument itself. This skepticism is the direct result of denying AC1 and is best characterized as a failure to be aware whether or not one is

justified in a belief.

What does it mean for a theory to fail to satisfy the AC1 requirement for justification? By definition, if one fails to satisfy the AC1 requirement, then one will not be aware, or even potentially aware, that the conditions for justification, whatever they may be, are met. This means that if justification, and thereby knowledge, can be obtained without satisfying the AC1 requirement, then justification and knowledge fail to require that one even has potential awareness that she is justified in a belief or in possession of knowledge.

It is neither my intention to claim what justification or knowledge should be nor to rule out any possible conceptions of knowledge or justification from being what we do mean when we say knowledge or justification. However, I would like to comment on the nature of justification and knowledge that lack the AC1 requirement. This comment is that any theory of justification that fails to satisfy the AC1 requirement is committed to the worst results of skepticism: the inability to even be potentially aware if one is justified in any of their beliefs, and therefore the inability to even be potentially aware if one possesses any knowledge.

As a skeptic, I see no problem with believing that I have knowledge or justification if justification and thereby knowledge fail to satisfy the AC1 requirement. The skeptical question, as I see it, is can we be aware that the conditions for justification are met where the conditions guarantee that the belief is at least slightly more likely to be true than false. I cannot see how this can be achieved, and yet, I can see how we can have justification and knowledge if we rule out the AC1 requirement. The skepticism in

which I am interested and in which I fear is not that knowledge and justification are impossible, but that we cannot be aware if we possess any or not. Therefore, if the AC1 requirement is determined to not be required for what we mean by justification and thereby knowledge, then I will still remain a skeptic and yet I may well possess justification and knowledge, as well as justification and knowledge that I have justification and knowledge. In other words, I may know things and know that I know these things and still be a skeptic.

From my reasoning on this matter I can conceive of no way to overcome this skeptical worry without accepting AC1 and the premises of the skeptical argument. Unfortunately, accepting AC1 and the premises of the skeptical argument force me to the skeptical conclusion. This is not a result that I have sought, but it is the result that I have found. My only hope is that my reasoning in this matter is somehow flawed.

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