Reasoning One’s Way out of Skepticism

Submitted to the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy on May 31 2011 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

Thesis Abstract

Many have thought that it is impossible to rationally persuade a skeptic that we have knowledge of the external world. My dissertation aims to show that this can be done.

In chapter one I consider a common reason for complacency about skepticism. Many contemporary philosophers reject the skeptic’s conclusion on the grounds that mere philosophical argument can’t rationally undermine common sense. I consider the standard arguments for this view and find them wanting. I then argue in a positive vein that philosophy can overturn common sense, on the assumption (shared by my opponents) that science can overturn common sense. That the skeptic can’t simply be ignored makes the task of convincing the skeptic all the more urgent.

In the first half of chapter two I aim to convince the external world skeptic that her position is irrational. Whoever accepts the argument for external world skepticism is, I claim, thereby committed to accepting skepticism about the past, which commits them to accepting a complex argument for skepticism about complex reasoning. But if one accepts this argument, one’s position is self-undermining in the following sense: one believes a proposition P while at the same time believing that one should not believe P. This combination of beliefs is not rational. But it is forced on anyone who accepts the argument for external world skepticism, making it irrational to accept that argument.

I concluded in the first half of chapter two that one shouldn’t believe skepticism, but this leaves open the possibility that one should suspend judgment on skepticism. Next I argue that this position is also irrational. However, this still doesn’t quite establish that we should believe that skepticism is false, for we need to rule out the possibility that we are caught in an epistemic dilemma: that all attitudes one could take toward skepticism would be irrational. I go on to argue that epistemic dilemmas are not possible. With this claim in place, it follows that we ought to believe that skepticism is false. So it is possible to reason one’s way out of skepticism.

Thesis Supervisor: Roger White
Title: Associate Professor of Philosophy
Acknowledgements

Thanks to Brad Skow, Dan Greco, Julia Markovits, Ram Neta, Steve Yablo, Alex Byrne, Robert Stalnaker, Andrew Graham, Agustin Rayo, Adam Elga, Jonathan Vogel, David Gray, audiences at the MIT MATTI Reading Group and the MIT Epistemology Reading Group and participants in the MIT Job Market Seminar. Many thanks also to Miriam Schoenfeld for our many helpful conversations on these topics. Finally, special thanks to Roger White—this thesis has benefited greatly from his many suggestions and comments. This material is based upon work supported under a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship.
Why Philosophy Can Overturn Common Sense

0. Introduction

Many contemporary philosophers have a rather limited view of what our discipline could hope to achieve. They think that philosophical arguments could not rationally overturn our pre-theoretical common sense convictions. Here, for example, is Kit Fine:

“In this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe.”¹

And David Lewis:

“One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or justify these preexisting opinions, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system.”²

Other advocates of positions of this kind include Lycan (2001), Kelly (2005), and Kelly (2008). On the other hand, some contemporary analytic philosophers take the opposing view. They present and endorse philosophical arguments against various claims of common sense. For example, Unger (1975) argues that no one knows anything at all. Van Inwagen (1990), Dorr (2002), and others argue that macroscopic objects like tables and chairs do not exist.

Finally, I’ll include some remarks on this topic by Kant and Hegel:

“To appeal to ordinary common sense...is one of the subtle discoveries of recent times, whereby the dullest windbag can confidently take on the most profound thinker and hold his own with him.”³

“Since the man of common sense makes his appeal to feeling, to an oracle within his breast, he is finished and done with anyone who does not agree; he has only to explain that he has nothing more to say to anyone who does not find and feel the same in himself. In other words, he tramples underfoot the roots of humanity.”⁴

As for myself, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that Lewis, Fine, and company are dull windbags. And I am not yet convinced that they have trampled underfoot the roots of humanity. However, my view is in the spirit of these remarks. For I believe, contra Lewis, Fine, etc., that philosophy can overturn common sense. It is the aim of this chapter to defend that position.

¹ Fine (2001, 2)
² Lewis (1973, 88)
³ Kant (2008, 9)
⁴ Hegel (1977, 43)
The chapter has two parts. In part one, I undermine some of the main reasons philosophers have given for thinking that philosophical reflection can’t overturn common sense. First I consider the Moorean idea that common sense propositions are more plausible than philosophical claims. Then I turn to the view, defended in Kelly 2005 and also implicit in Goodman 1983, that one should retain belief in judgments about particular cases at the expense of general philosophical principles that conflict with them. Finally I consider a version of reflective equilibrium, defended in Harman 2003, in which conservatism plays an important role.

In part two, I present and endorse a positive argument for the claim that philosophy can overturn common sense. My opponents and I agree that science can overturn common sense. But, I claim, every scientific argument relies on assumptions that are highly theoretical, even philosophical. If a scientific argument against a common sense proposition is to succeed, then its philosophical assumptions must be more worthy of belief than the common sense proposition under attack. But this means that there could be a philosophical argument against common sense, each of whose premises is just as powerful, epistemically, as the scientist’s philosophical assumptions. If the scientific argument can succeed, then so, too, can the purely philosophical argument, and so philosophy is capable of overturning common sense.

Part two does not presuppose any of the material from part one; those wishing to skip directly to it may begin with section 5.

Before moving on to the details of these arguments, I would like to say why I think this debate is so important. If my opponents are right, then I think the value and interest of philosophy are significantly diminished. Most people—philosophers and non-philosophers alike—care deeply about the truth of common sense propositions. It matters greatly to us whether we know anything about the external world; whether macroscopic objects like tables and chairs exist; which actions, if any, are morally right and which are morally wrong; etc. Almost everything we think, say, and do presupposes some proposition of common sense (or its negation). If the business of philosophy is, at least in part, to inquire into the truth of these propositions—with the real possibility left open that we may find good reasons for rejecting them—then philosophy is highly relevant to almost every aspect of our daily lives.

If, on the other hand, philosophers proceed by simply taking for granted a large collection of common sense beliefs, and aim merely to “discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system,” then I think it is much less obvious whether anyone should care about what happens in philosophy. It’s hard to see how this activity could yield results that directly impact what we care about most.

Thus, for those of us who have chosen to devote our lives to philosophy, I think the question of whether philosophy can overturn common sense is a very pressing one indeed. So I am very pleased to say that I think the answer to this question is yes. It is

5 Some philosophers who deny that tables, chairs, etc. exist may not in fact be denying any common sense propositions. These philosophers typically hold that there do really exist particles arranged table-wise, and sometimes it is claimed that what we ordinarily mean when we say or presuppose that tables exist is no more than that there are particles arranged table-wise. Since these philosophers don’t take themselves to be denying what we ordinarily mean by “tables exist,” such philosophers may not count as denying common sense propositions.

6 Lewis (1973, 88)
my aim in this chapter to present some considerations that, I hope, will move you to share this view.

1. Introduction to Part One

In this first half of the chapter I will consider some of the most common motivations for my opponents' view that philosophy cannot overturn common sense. Each motivation relies crucially on some principle of philosophical methodology. I will consider the following three methodological principles: (1) common sense propositions enjoy greater plausibility than philosophical claims, and thus should be given priority when they conflict (defended most famously by Moore 1962); (2) judgments about particular cases should be given priority over judgments about general principles (defended in Kelly 2005 as a kind of Mooreanism and also in Goodman 1983 as an aspect of reflective equilibrium); (3) conservatism—minimizing change—is an important aspect of rational belief revision (defended in Harman 2003 as a version of reflective equilibrium and also suggested by certain remarks in Lewis 1996).

In each case, I will argue either that the methodological principle in question is false, or that it fails to provide a genuinely independent motivation for the idea that philosophy can't overturn common sense.

Throughout the discussion, I will focus (as do the defenders of these principles) on the case of external world skepticism. The skeptic presents us with a valid argument with plausible philosophical premises for the conclusion that no one knows anything about the external world. For example, the skeptic may argue that all we have to go on in assessing propositions about the external world is the evidence of our senses, i.e. propositions about how things appear to us. But, continues the skeptic, this evidence is neutral between the hypothesis that the external world really is as it seems and the hypothesis that one is a brain in a vat being deceived by a mad scientist. So, concludes the skeptic, no one knows whether they really have hands, whether there is a table before them, etc.

By presenting her argument, the skeptic has shown us that there is a contradiction between some plausible epistemological principles and our ordinary common sense beliefs about what we know. How should we revise our beliefs in light of this? Should we accept the skeptic’s premises and the radical conclusion that follows from them? Or should we hold on to our pre-theoretic belief that we know many things, and reject one of the skeptic’s premises? Each of the three methodological principles I will discuss yields the verdict (according to its defenders) that we should hold on to our common sense beliefs about the extent of our knowledge, and give up one of the skeptic’s premises. But I will argue that these principles do not succeed in motivating this view.

2. Moore’s Plausibility Principle

We begin, of course, with G. E. Moore. I’ll follow Lycan 2001 in characterizing Moore’s view roughly as follows: A common sense proposition is more plausible than any premise in a philosophical argument against it. So, if forced to choose between common sense and a philosophical premise, one should retain belief in common sense and give up the philosophical premise. Call this Moore’s Plausibility Principle.
In assessing this view, I think we should first ask what is meant by "plausible." On one reading, A is more plausible than B just in case A seems pre-theoretically prima facie more worthy of belief than B. If this is what is meant by "plausible," then I am willing to grant that ordinary common sense may indeed be more plausible than complex abstract philosophical principles.

The trouble is that it is simply not the case that, when conflicts arise, we should always retain belief in whichever proposition seems pre-theoretically prima facie more worthy of belief. Sometimes one discovers by reflection that one's pre-theoretical judgments of comparative worthiness of belief were the reverse of what they should have been. For example, consider the following two propositions: (A) There are more positive integers than there are positive even integers. (B) Two sets X and Y have the same cardinality just in case there is a one-to-one mapping from the elements of X to the elements of Y and there is a one-to-one mapping from the elements of Y to the elements of X. Pre-theoretically, A seems more worthy of belief than B. It just seems obvious that there are more positive integers than positive even integers, and B is a complicated principle that requires some thought before endorsing. So if plausibility is interpreted as suggested above, Moore's Plausibility Principle says that one should retain belief in A and reject B. However, this is exactly the opposite of what should be done. Reflection should result in a reversal of one's initial judgment of the comparative worthiness of belief of these two propositions.

For all that has been said so far, the skeptical case could be just like this one. Pre-theoretically, it may seem obvious that one knows that one has hands, and the premises of the skeptical argument may seem to be complicated claims that require thought before endorsing. However, after reflecting on the skeptical premises, they come to seem more and more plausible until it becomes clear that they are undeniable, and the claim to knowledge must be rejected. So, although the skeptic may agree with Moore about the pre-theoretical, prima facie judgments, neither the skeptic nor Moore should accept the principle that these initial judgments determine which of the two propositions it is rational to give up, since reflection can sometimes reveal that one's initial judgments were the reverse of what they should have been.

This discussion may suggest an alternative reading of the Plausibility Principle. On the first reading, which of two conflicting propositions you should give up depends on your pre-theoretic judgments about them. On the second version of the principle, which of the two propositions you should give up is not determined by your initial judgments; rather, it is determined by your judgments upon careful reflection. According to this version of the principle, one should give up whichever of the two propositions seems least worthy of belief upon careful reflection.

However, this version of the principle does not yield the result the Moorean desires. It makes the normative facts about what one should believe dependent on the contingent psychological facts about what happens to seem most worthy of belief upon

---

7 This point is also made by Conee 2001 and echoed by Kelly 2005.
8 The Monty Hall problem may provide another example of a case in which one's initial judgments of the comparative worthiness of belief are the reverse of what they should be. Brad Skow reports (personal communication) that he was initially completely convinced that there is no benefit to switching doors. In general, psychology experiments like the Wason card selection task and the experiments discussed in the heuristics and biases literature (see for example Kahneman, Tversky, and Slovic 1982) provide another source of counterexamples to Moore's Plausibility Principle.
reflection. As a matter of psychological fact, upon careful reflection, each premise of the skeptical argument seems to the external world skeptic to be more worthy of belief than the common sense view that she has knowledge of the external world. So, according to this version of the plausibility principle, she should give up the common sense belief on the basis of the philosophical argument for skepticism. If so, then philosophical argument can undermine common sense, which is exactly what the Moorean seeks to deny.

We may consider a third, more normative understanding of what plausibility amounts to: A is more plausible than B just in case as a matter of fact A is more worthy of belief than B. This does not seem to help much; after all, the skeptic thinks that her premises are more worthy of belief than the common sense claim to knowledge, and so the skeptic will think that this version of the plausibility principle vindicates her position.

The Moorean may try to tack on the claim that the skeptic is wrong about this: that, as a matter of fact, it is the common sense claim that is most worthy of belief. Simply to insist that this is the case, however, does not provide us with an independent motivation for the Moorean view. To say that common sense propositions are more worthy of belief than philosophical claims just is to say that, in cases of conflict, we should retain belief in common sense propositions at the expense of philosophical claims, which is just to say that philosophy can’t overturn common sense. What we have here is a restatement of Moore’s view, not an independent motivation for it.

I conclude, then, that each version of the plausibility principle is either false, or fails to provide a genuinely independent motivation for the view that philosophy can’t overturn common sense.

3. General Principles vs. Particular Case Judgments

In his 2005 paper “Moorean Facts and Belief Revision or Can the Skeptic Win?”, Tom Kelly draws the same conclusion that I did in the previous section: Moore’s plausibility principle does not successfully make the case that philosophical argumentation can’t overturn common sense propositions like our ordinary claims to knowledge. However, Kelly then goes on to provide an alternative interpretation of Moore that he thinks does succeed in showing this. I think Kelly’s view is equally unsuccessful.

Kelly begins by distinguishing two different principles of philosophical methodology: particularism and methodism. The particularist and the methodist both begin with some initial judgments about particular cases, and some initial judgments about general principles. The difference between them manifests itself when a contradiction is discovered between one of the initial case judgments and one of the general principle judgments. In the face of such a contradiction, the particularist will retain belief in the case judgment at the expense of the general principle. The methodist

---

9 Kelly’s terminology is borrowed from Chisholm’s 1973 book *The Problem of the Criterion*. Chisholm used the terms slightly differently, to mark the distinction between the epistemologist who builds his theory of knowledge around his initial views about the extent of our knowledge (the particularist) and the epistemologist who builds his theory of knowledge around his initial views about the criteria for knowledge (the methodist).
will do exactly the opposite, retaining belief in the general principle at the expense of the particular case judgment.

Kelly's sympathies lie with the particularist. Moreover, he thinks that most philosophers are committed to particularism by the very common practice of giving up a general principle in light of a single counterexample. Consider, for example, Gettier's argument, accepted by almost all epistemologists, against the theory that knowledge is justified true belief. A methodist could not accept this argument. The fact that almost all philosophers do accept it reveals, according to Kelly, that we are implicitly committed to a particularistic, rather than methodistic, philosophical methodology. From this commitment, claims Kelly, we can derive a commitment to the Moorean response to the skeptic.

Kelly first notes that the skeptical argument relies crucially on a general principle about knowledge or evidence. Moreover, he says, anyone who accepts the skeptical argument will have to give up a number of judgments about cases, like the judgment that I know that I have hands, that I know there is a table before me, etc. When we are confronted with the skeptic's argument, then, we are forced to choose between a general principle and some judgments about cases. The choice for the particularist is clear: we must retain belief in our judgments about cases at the expense of the skeptic's general principle. If so, then the skeptical argument cannot overturn our common sense beliefs about the extent of our knowledge.  

The only way out of this conclusion, according to Kelly, is to adopt methodism instead of particularism as a principle of philosophical methodology. However, this option is highly undesirable, since a methodist could never give up a general principle in the face of a counterexample.

---

10 Nelson Goodman, in his discussion of the philosophical methodology that he called "reflective equilibrium" in *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* makes an argument against the inductive skeptic that is essentially the same as Kelly's argument against the external world skeptic. According to Goodman, we discover what a term means by finding a general principle about its meaning according to which the cases to which the term is actually applied just are the cases to which the term is properly applied. This is how we determine what "tree" means: we try to find a general principle that captures what is in common between all the objects to which we apply the term "tree." Likewise, says Goodman, if you want to figure out what it is for something to be a valid induction, then look for whatever it is that is in common between all of the arguments to which we actually apply the term "valid induction." Clearly, if this is our procedure for determining what a valid induction is, we will never find out that there are no valid inductions, and so the inductive skeptic is wrong: there is no way that we could reach his conclusion by applying the proper methodology. This methodology may not sound very much like reflective equilibrium, since reflective equilibrium is supposed to be a bi-directional process of adjusting both the case judgments and the general principles to bring them into equilibrium with each other. The process I described sounds instead like a one-directional process in which the case judgments are held constant and the general principles are molded to fit them. But, whatever is meant by "reflective equilibrium" these days, Goodman does not seem to think that it would ever be rational to give up many case judgments because they conflict with a general principle. He does think that general principles can influence our case judgments in the following way: once we have found a general principle that systematizes our initial case judgments, we can use that general principle to determine which judgments we should have about cases about which we were initially unsure. But nowhere does Goodman say that we might *revise* a case judgment about which we were initially sure because it conflicts with a general principle. Indeed, the assumption that this should not happen is required for his argument against the inductive skeptic. Thus, I interpret Goodman as advancing an anti-skeptical argument which relies on particularism, in Kelly's sense.
I think Kelly has presented us with a false dilemma. I agree that methodism is undesirable, and I agree that particularism would commit us to the Moorean response to the skeptic. However, we are not forced to choose between just these two theories of philosophical methodology. Both the methodist and the particularist share a problematic presupposition: that when one discovers a contraction between two beliefs, the mere fact that one is a case judgment and the other a general principle is sufficient to determine which one should be given up. This presupposition should be rejected. Sometimes we should give up the general principle; sometimes we should give up the case judgment; what we should give up depends on further details, and cannot simply be read off the form of the beliefs alone.

Counterexamples like Gettier’s show us that it can sometimes be rational to give up a general principle that conflicts with a case judgment, but it doesn’t show that we should always give up the general principle in a case of conflict. I will now present two cases in which one should give up a case judgment that conflicts with a general principle. If I am right about these cases, then particularism is false, and Kelly’s argument for Mooreanism does not go through.

My first example is taken from the philosophy of probability; I include it mainly for breadth. My second example is a case from epistemology; I think it’s strongly parallel to the skepticism case, and thus is particularly instructive in this context.

First, consider someone who tends to commit the gambler’s fallacy. If he sees a fair coin land heads many times in a row, he judges that the coin is more likely to land tails than heads on the next toss; if the coin lands tails many times in a row, he judges that heads is more likely than tails on the next toss; etc. Suppose that this person then takes a philosophy of probability class, and encounters the principle “Independent tosses of a fair coin are equally likely to come up heads.” This principle strikes him as highly plausible. Then, however, it is pointed out to him that if he accepts this principle, he should no longer judge that heads is more likely than tails after a long series of tails (and likewise for the other gambler’s fallacy judgments he is apt to make).

Now according to particularism, the only rational response for this person is to regard the principle as false, since it conflicts with many of his case judgments. But this is clearly wrong: it may well be that the rational response for him is to give up the case judgments. After all, if this person reflects on the principle, he may come to see why it’s true, and come to realize that his previous case judgments were mistaken and confused. In such a case we would want to say that the rational thing for this person to do is to retain belief in the general principle, and let this principle guide his case judgments. But this is exactly what particularism says he must not do.

I think there are many examples of this sort: cases in which many of one’s initial case judgments were based on confusion, which can be cleared up when one reflects on a conflicting (but true) general principle. Many of the other examples from the heuristics and biases literature could be used to make the same point.

My next example is taken from epistemology. Consider someone who has never taken a philosophy class, and who has never taken the time to reflect on the epistemic status of ordinary, day-to-day beliefs. Let’s call this person Ordinary. Now imagine that a philosopher goes and has a chat with Ordinary. They are sitting on a sofa in front of a table, on which there lies a book, in plain view, in natural light, etc. Upon chatting with Ordinary, the philosopher discovers that he believes many things, including the
following: he believes that there’s a book on the table and he believes that the sun will rise tomorrow. The philosopher stubs his toe on the leg of the table, and discovers that Ordinary also believes that the philosopher is in pain. Moreover, the philosopher discovers that Ordinary is psychologically certain of these things, and takes himself to be justified in being certain of them. Having never heard of the fanciful skeptical hypotheses familiar to philosophers, Ordinary takes himself to have definitively ruled out all possibilities in which these propositions are false, and so takes himself to be fully justified and rational in being certain that they are true.

Suppose, however, that the philosopher goes on to describe to Ordinary certain skeptical scenarios, involving evil demons who trick people into believing that there are books in front of them when there really aren’t, counter inductive worlds in which on one remarkable day the sun fails to rise, bread fails to nourish etc., and worlds containing zombies who are behaviorally equivalent to humans but have no conscious experiences. Upon realizing that such scenarios are possible, Ordinary realizes that many of his previous judgments of the form “I am justified in being certain that P” conflict with the principle “If there is a scenario in which not-P that one cannot definitively rule out, then one is not justified in being certain that P.”

How should Ordinary revise his beliefs upon discovering this contradiction? I think most epistemologists would agree that he should retain the general principle and give up the case judgments. Of course, most would also say that he should still think that he knows these propositions, or at least that he’s justified in believing them. But he should no longer think that he’s justified in being certain of them, since he no longer takes himself to have ruled out all possible scenarios in which they are false.

This is another case in which a number of one’s initial case judgments were mistaken as a result of conceptual confusion which can be cleared up by reflection. In this case, we might say that Ordinary was lead into these mistakes by a limited imagination: he failed to realize that scenarios like the skeptical scenarios were possible; they had simply never occurred to him. This failure to recognize the possibility of scenarios of a certain sort lead him to misapply his own concept of justified certainty. So this is a case in which Ordinary should, upon realizing this mistake, retain belief in the general principle about certainty and let its proper application guide his case judgments.

These two counterexamples to particularism illustrate a general way in which it goes wrong. Particularism does not allow for the possibility that one systematically misapplies one’s own concepts due to conceptual confusion. But surely this is possible, as these two cases illustrate. It is possible to systematically misapply one’s concept of comparative probability, and it is possible to systematically misapply one’s concept of justified certainty. The skeptic claims that, just as it is possible to systematically misapply these concepts, it is possible to systematically misapply our concept of knowledge. And this, contends the skeptic, is exactly what we have in fact done.

In comparing the skeptical case to the two cases just discussed, I think it is especially helpful to focus on the certainty case. This is because the response to the conflict in the certainty case that is widely agreed by epistemologists to be the rational one is highly structurally analogous to what the skeptic takes to be the rational response in the case of knowledge. In both cases, there is some general principle about the

---

11 Strictly speaking, particularism does not allow for the possibility that one rationally believes that one has systematically failed to misapply one’s own concept.
conditions under which one stands in a certain kind of epistemic relation to a proposition. In the one case, it is a principle about when one is justified in being certain of something; in the other case, it is whatever principle about knowledge is employed in the skeptical argument. In both cases, one initially judges, of many of the propositions that one believes, that one does stand in that epistemic relation to them. In fact, it may well be almost the same set of propositions in each case. Most epistemologists would recommend revising one’s belief, about each such proposition, that one is justified in being certain of it. The skeptic recommends revising one’s belief, about each such proposition, that one knows it. The two cases of belief revision are, structurally, almost exactly the same.

We have just seen that the certainty case blocks Kelly’s anti-skeptical argument by showing that the methodological principle he relies on—particularism—is not true. In general, it is a consequence of the close structural similarity of the certainty case and the knowledge case that it will be extremely hard for any general principle of philosophical methodology to yield the right result about the certainty case—namely, that one should give up one’s initial case judgments—while also yielding the result that one should retain one’s initial case judgments about what one knows.

It’s time to take stock. Kelly endorses the methodological claim that in cases of conflict, one should give up a general principle when it conflicts with a case judgment. If this is true, then, when confronted with a conflict between a general philosophical principle and a common sense judgment about a particular case, one should give up the philosophical principle and retain belief in the common sense judgment. However, I have argued that Kelly’s methodological principle fails because it does not allow for the possibility that one has systematically misapplied one’s concepts. I used two cases—the gambler’s fallacy case and the certainty case—to illustrate that systematic misapplication of concepts is indeed possible.

4. Conservatism and Reflective Equilibrium

In this section I will discuss a version of reflective equilibrium that emphasizes minimal change as an important aspect of rational belief revision—not just in philosophy, but belief revision of any kind. I will focus on the version elaborated and defended by Gil Harman, but note that Lewis 1996, Pryor 2000, and many others also take conservatism to be an important part of proper philosophical methodology.

In the section entitled “Philosophical Skepticism” of his paper “Skepticism and Foundations,” Harman describes the basics of his version of reflective equilibrium and argues that it has the result that we should retain belief in the common sense proposition that we know we have hands and give up one of the skeptic’s premises.

Harman begins by considering a person—let’s call him Ordinary—who has the usual beliefs about the external world, and about the extent of his knowledge of the external world, and who also believes (implicitly, perhaps) the premises of the skeptical argument. Suppose Ordinary then discovers the contradiction between his beliefs about the extent of his knowledge and the skeptical premises that he accepts. How should Ordinary revise his beliefs in order to avoid this inconsistency?

Harman’s principle says that “the way to resolve such conflicts is by finding the minimal adjustment in S’s beliefs and methods that provides the most simple and
coherent upshot.” Upon discovering a contradiction in one’s beliefs, one must choose to
update to just one of the many possible complete systems of belief that resolve this
contradiction in some way. According to the Harman principle, you should adopt
whichever one of these complete systems of belief best balances minimal change,
coherence, and simplicity.

Now consider the particular case at hand, in which one has discovered a conflict
between the skeptic’s premises and one’s beliefs about the extent of one’s knowledge.
Retaining the skeptical premises requires giving up a vast number of beliefs about the
external world, and about one’s knowledge of it. This would involve a very large change
in one’s system of belief. Giving up one of the skeptical premises, however, would
require only a very small change in comparison; all of one’s beliefs about the external
world, and one’s knowledge of it, would remain intact. Thus, Harman’s principle of
belief revision, with its emphasis on minimal change, yields the result that one ought to
give up one of the skeptical premises. Once again, I’m happy to concede for the sake of
argument that the verdict generalizes: that whenever one finds a philosophical argument
against a common sense proposition, rejecting one of the premises would result in a more
minimal overall change than would accepting the argument; and so, Harman’s view
yields the result that, in general, philosophy can’t overturn common sense.

Lewis expresses the same general thought in the following quote from “Elusive
Knowledge:” “We are caught between the rock of fallibilism and the whirlpool of
skepticism. Both are mad! Yet fallibilism is the less intrusive madness. It demands less
frequent corrections of what we want to say. So, if forced to choose, I choose
fallibilism.” I’ll focus on Harman’s version of the idea, though, since it’s developed in
more detail.

I will argue that Harman’s principle of rational belief revision is not a good one.
First, note that the counterexamples to particularism also constitute counterexamples to
Harman’s principle. In these counterexamples, it is rational to revise a great many of
one’s initial case judgments because they conflict with a single general principle.
Because there are so many case judgments that must be revised, rejecting the general
principle instead would have constituted a more minimal change. So, Harman’s principle
shares the flaw identified earlier in Kelly’s principle: it does not allow for the possibility
of systematic misapplication of one’s concepts.

However, I want to develop and bring out another, perhaps deeper, problem with
Harman’s principle of rational belief revision.

As noted above, while Harman takes his principle to correctly describe rational
revision of beliefs in philosophy, he does not think it is limited to beliefs in this area.
Indeed, Harman takes his principle to apply to all rational belief revision. I will present a
counterexample to Harman’s view involving a case of evidence by testimony to bring out
the second general problem with Harman’s principle. Ultimately, I will argue that
Harman’s principle fails to be appropriately sensitive to the relations of epistemic
dependence that obtain between some beliefs.

12 In fact, Harman needs to make a few further assumptions in order to reach this conclusion. It must be
assumed that giving up the skeptical principle does not result in large losses in simplicity and coherence;
and, it must be assumed that the option of retaining the skeptical principle and the claims to knowledge,
and giving up the belief that they conflict, would not be acceptable.
I’ll start by describing a case that does not itself constitute a counterexample to Harman’s principle, but which will help me set up the counterexample.

**Case 1:** Imagine that you have lived your entire life in a remote, isolated village, and know nothing about the world beyond the village borders. One day you encounter a visiting stranger, Alice, who tells you she’s spent her life traveling around the world, including a place called “Costa Rica,” and proceeds to tell you about the beautiful birds she saw there. Naturally, you believe what she tells you. Later, however, you meet up with one of your best buddies—Bert. Bert has an uncanny knack for being able to tell when people are lying. Time and again he’s told you that someone was lying about something, and independent investigation proved him right. This time, Bert tells you that Alice was lying—in fact, she has never been to Costa Rica.

It is obvious that in this situation you should believe Bert. After all, Bert has an excellent track record of detecting lying, and you only just met Alice. Now consider a modified version of this case. **Case 2** is exactly like case 1, with the following exception:

**Case 2:** Alice didn’t just tell you a few things about Costa Rica. Rather, she has told you many stories about her travels all around the world. You love listening to these stories, and you spent most of your evenings listening to them. As a result, you have accumulated a vast and detailed system of beliefs about the world beyond the village border, all on the basis of Alice’s testimony. It is only after this has been going on quite a while that Bert tells you that Alice has been lying the whole time.

I think it’s equally obvious that you should believe Bert in case 2 as well. After all, as before, Bert has an incredible track record; and, the mere fact that Alice has told you many things does not make any particular one of them more credible.

However, Harman’s principle says otherwise. In case 2 (but not case 1) believing Bert would require you to give up a vast number of other beliefs that you have—you would have to give up all your beliefs about the nature of the world outside your village. This constitutes quite a substantial change in your overall system of belief. Such a substantial change would not be required if you were to believe instead that Bert just happened to be wrong in this particular case. This would be quite a minimal change, overall, since you could retain all the beliefs you formed on the basis of Alice’s testimony. So, Harman’s principle says you should retain belief in everything that Alice told you. But clearly this is not the rational response to hearing what Bert said. You should believe Bert, even though this requires you to give up all of your beliefs about what lies beyond the village border.

Before explaining what general problem I think this illustrates with Harman’s view, I will consider and respond to a possible response from a defender of Harman’s principle of belief revision.

Harman might respond that in fact, his principle does not have the consequence that I claim it has. I claimed that Harman’s principle has the consequence that you should retain believe in what Alice told you, since this makes for a more minimal change. But Harman’s principle says that minimal change is just one criterion, to be balanced
with the other criteria of simplicity and coherence. While there doesn’t seem to be any difference in simplicity between the two belief systems, there may seem to be a difference in coherence. It will be helpful to describe in more detail the two complete belief systems you’re choosing between. I’ve named them BERT and ALICE:

BERT: Bert is right that Alice was lying to me; after all, he’s always been right in the past. So, I cannot trust anything that Alice told me, and must give up all the beliefs I had formed on the basis of her testimony.

ALICE: Alice has been telling me the truth the entire time. Although Bert is generally right, he was wrong in this case.

Harman might claim that ALICE, while a more minimal change than BERT, is less coherent than BERT. After all, on belief system ALICE, you believe that Bert is generally reliable, but you also believe that he was wrong in this case, even though you don’t also believe that there is some particular feature of this case in virtue of which he was likely to make a mistake. Surely this collection of beliefs doesn’t hang together very well, and could be seen as making for a slight incoherence in belief system ALICE.

I have several things to say in response. First, even if ALICE is slightly less coherent than BERT, it remains that BERT involves a much more substantial change than ALICE. Harman has not told us how much weight to give the various criteria of coherence, minimal change, etc., but unless coherence is given much more weight than minimal change, it looks like on balance, Harman’s principle still favors ALICE over BERT.

Setting this aside, though, I think this putative problem can easily be circumvented. A slight modification of ALICE will get rid of the minor incoherence. Consider ALICE*:

ALICE*: Alice has been telling me the truth the entire time. Although in general when Bert tells me someone is lying, that person really is lying, I can see that Bert is jealous of all the time I’m spending with Alice, and he told me she is lying only because he hopes it will have the effect of my spending less time with her. I couldn’t explain to someone in words exactly what it is that makes me believe he’s jealous, but I can just tell he is by the way they interact.

ALICE* does not have any of the mild incoherence that might have been found in ALICE; and, it is still a much more minimal change than BERT. So, even if Harman’s principle does not yield the result that the rational response to hearing what Bert had to say is to revise your beliefs to the system ALICE, it does say that rather than revising your system of beliefs to BERT, you should revise your system of beliefs to ALICE*, since that would constitute a much more minimal change, and it is no less simple or coherent.

So, for example, consider someone who, prior to hearing Bert’s claim that Alice is lying, did not suspect that Bert was jealous, and who has no good evidence that Bert is jealous. However, this person is loath to make any very serious changes to his belief system, and whenever he encounters evidence against many of his beliefs, he has a
tendency to come up with some way of explaining the evidence away, rather than coming to terms with the real implications of the evidence (of course he would not describe himself that way). So, when this person hears Bert’s claim that Alice has been lying, he immediately begins to suspect that there’s something fishy going on, and eventually convinces himself that Bert is jealous of Alice, etc.—in short, he comes to accept belief system ALICE*. According to Harman’s principle, this person is revising his beliefs exactly as he should be. But this is clearly the wrong result. The rational response to Bert’s testimony is not to continue to believe Alice, but rather to give up belief in everything Alice said.

Now that I’ve established that this case does indeed constitute a problem for Harman’s principle, I’ll move on to the diagnosis: what deeper problem with Harman’s principle is illustrated by this counterexample?

The core of my diagnosis will be as follows. There is a relation of epistemic dependence that holds between some beliefs (I will say more about epistemic dependence in a moment). I claim that beliefs that depend epistemically on some other belief Q are irrelevant to whether or not Q should be given up. That is, how many beliefs there are that depend on Q, and what the contents of those beliefs are, is irrelevant to whether belief in Q should be maintained. But whether Harman’s principle recommends giving up belief in Q is sometimes determined in part by beliefs that depend on Q. This is the problem with Harman’s principle that is brought out by the counterexample I gave.

In order to further explain and defend this diagnosis, I need to give some explanation of the notion of epistemic dependence. There are several formal properties of the dependence relation that can be noted at the outset. First, dependence is relative to an agent; it may be that P depends on Q for one agent but not for another. Second, the dependence relation is never symmetric. If P depends on Q, then Q does not depend on P (relative to the same agent, of course).13

Now for a more substantive characterization of dependence. The intuitive idea is that P depends on Q for an agent S when S’s belief that P is based (at least in part) on S’s belief that Q, and when Q (perhaps in conjunction with other beliefs that S has) does indeed justify P; P derives its justification (at least in part) from Q.

Relations of epistemic dependence are commonplace. My belief that the chicken I just ate had not gone bad depends on my belief that I took the chicken meat out of the freezer and into the fridge only a day or two ago (and not, say, several weeks ago). My belief that the temperature is 84 degrees depends on my belief that my thermometer reads “84.” My belief that the butler did it depends on my belief that the butler’s fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime.

Moreover, your belief that there are beautiful birds in Costa Rica depends on your belief that Alice is telling the truth. Harman’s principle says that you should retain your belief that Alice is telling the truth because giving it up would require you to give up your belief that birds in Costa Rica are beautiful, and all other such beliefs. On Harman’s

13 Some epistemologists (perhaps some coherentists) may disagree with me about this; they may think that some cases of dependence are symmetric. That’s ok for me, as long as the coherentist is willing to grant that some cases of dependence are asymmetric, and, in particular, that my belief that birds in Costa Rica are beautiful asymmetrically depends on my belief that Alice has been telling the truth. Instead of claiming that beliefs that depend on Q are never relevant to whether Q should be given up, I would then re-state my claim as this: beliefs that depend asymmetrically on Q are never relevant to whether Q should be given up. The argument against Harman goes through just as well this way.
principle, part of what makes it the case that you are justified in holding on to your belief that Alice is telling the truth is that you have many other beliefs that depend on it, and which you would have to give up with it. But that is to make beliefs that depend on P relevant to whether or not belief in P should be retained. In particular, it is to make beliefs that depend on your belief that Alice is telling to truth relevant to whether you should continue to believe that Alice is telling the truth. And it is my contention that beliefs that depend on P are never relevant to whether belief in P should be retained. Whether you have any beliefs that depend on P, and if so, what beliefs they are, is irrelevant to whether or not it would be epistemically rational for you to retain belief in P. The problem with Harman’s principle is that it is not consistent with this fact.

Let’s take stock. I have argued that there are at least two main problems for Harman’s principle of belief revision. The first is that, like Kelly’s particularism, it does not allow for the possibility of systematic misapplication of concepts. The second is that it allows the number and nature of beliefs that depend on P to be relevant to whether belief in P should be retained. Thus, Harman’s principle is false, and so, like Moore’s plausibility principle and Kelly’s particularism, it cannot be used to motivate the idea that philosophy can’t overturn common sense.

5. Introduction to Part Two: Philosophy Can Overturn Common Sense

In this second part of the chapter I will provide a positive argument for the claim that philosophy can overturn common sense. In its simplest form, the argument is as follows:

(1) Science can overturn common sense.
(2) If science can overturn common sense, then so can philosophy.
(3) Therefore, philosophy can overturn common sense.

This argument is not original to me. Indeed, it is considered, and rejected, by many of my opponents. My main contribution will come in the form of my particular defense of premise (2), for it is this premise that is generally rejected by the advocates of common sense. Premise (1) is widely accepted, and the argument is valid, so I will focus primarily on defending premise (2) (though see section 7, reply to objection 5 for a defense of premise (1)).

It will be helpful to begin by considering my opponents’ argument against premise (2). Here are some relevant quotes, starting with one from Bill Lycan:

“Common-sense beliefs can be corrected, even trashed entirely, by careful empirical investigation and scientific theorizing...No purely philosophical premise can ever (legitimately) have as strong a claim to our allegiance as can a humble common-sense proposition such as Moore’s autobiographical ones. Science can correct common sense; metaphysics and philosophical "intuition" can only throw spithballs.”

Anil Gupta expresses a similar sentiment:

---

14 Lycan 2001
"Any theory that would wage war against common sense had better come loaded with some powerful ammunition. Philosophy is incapable of providing such ammunition. Empirical sciences are a better source."\textsuperscript{15}

The idea here—which is also found in Kelly 2008—can be summarized as follows: science, unlike philosophy, can appeal to empirical, observational evidence. When science undermines common sense, it does so by appealing to direct observation. When the philosopher attempts to undermine common sense, however, she can appeal only to highly theoretical premises, which are less powerful, epistemically, than observational evidence. So scientific arguments against common sense are more powerful than philosophical argument against common sense.

There are many concerns one might have about this argument. First, it is notoriously difficult to distinguish observational and theoretical claims. Second, even supposing one can do so, it is not clear that observational claims really are epistemically stronger than theoretical ones.

However, I want to set these worries aside, and focus on what I think is a deeper flaw in this argument. I agree with my opponents that scientific arguments, unlike philosophical arguments, appeal to observational claims. However, I will argue that scientific arguments must also rely on highly theoretical assumptions that are just as far removed from observation as the kinds of claims typically appealed to in philosophical arguments against common sense. Indeed, many of these theoretical scientific assumptions are straightforward examples of typical philosophical claims. An argument is only as strong as its weakest premise. So if a scientific argument is to succeed in undermining common sense, then each of its premises, individually, must be more epistemically powerful than the common sense proposition it targets.\textsuperscript{16} Since, as I claim, the scientific argument relies crucially on a philosophical assumption, this philosophical assumption must be more powerful than the common sense proposition. But if a philosophical claim can be more powerful than a common sense proposition, then there could be an argument consisting entirely of philosophical claims, each of which is more powerful than the common sense proposition whose negation they entail. If so, then philosophy can overturn common sense.

The argument I just sketched appealed to the following claim:

**Science Requires Philosophy (SRP):** Scientific arguments against common sense rely crucially on philosophical assumptions.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} Gupta (2006, 178)
\textsuperscript{16} A is more epistemically powerful than B just in case, if forced to choose between A and B, one should retain belief in A and give up belief in B.
\textsuperscript{17} As stated, SRP is ambiguous in a certain way: it doesn't specify whether some, most, or all scientific arguments against common sense rely on philosophical assumptions. In fact, for my argument to go through, all that is strictly speaking required is that one successful scientific argument against common sense relies on a philosophical assumption; for if so, then at least one philosophical assumption is more powerful than a common sense proposition, which shows that there could be a successful purely philosophical argument against common sense. However, as a matter of fact, I think that most, if not all, scientific arguments rely on philosophical assumptions. I will return to this question of generality at the end of the next section.
The next section will be devoted to defending this claim.

6. Defense of Science Requires Philosophy (SRP)

I will begin my case for SRP by considering what is perhaps the most widely accepted example of a case in which science has succeeded in overturning common sense: special relativity. Most philosophers—including many who think that philosophy can’t overturn common sense—believe that special relativity is true, and agree that special relativity conflicts with common sense. So if I can show that the scientific argument for special relativity relies crucially on a philosophical assumption, then this, in combination with my arguments from the previous section, will suffice to show that philosophy can overturn common sense.

We needn’t get too far into the technical details, but some basic knowledge of the case will be helpful. Consider a simultaneity proposition like this one: Joe’s piano recital and Sarah’s baseball game were happening at the same time. Pre-theoretically, we would think that a proposition like this one, if true, is objectively and absolutely true; its truth is not relative to a particular person or thing. “Licorice ice cream is delicious” may be true for Joe but not for Sarah, but the simultaneity proposition, we would normally think, is true absolutely if true at all. However, according to special relativity (SR), this is not the case. SR says that there are many different reference frames—each object has its own—and the very same simultaneity proposition may be true in one reference frame but not another. Moreover, there’s no particular reference frame that has got it right. Each reference frame has the same status; none is more legitimate than the others. So, special relativity conflicts with the common sense idea that simultaneity claims are absolute.

Now, there is an alternative scientific hypothesis—the so-called neo-Lorentzian view—that is empirically equivalent to special relativity but which does not conflict with the common sense idea that simultaneity is absolute. Special relativity and neo-Lorentzianism agree on almost everything. In particular, they agree on all observational propositions—there is no possible experiment that would decide between them. The main difference is that according to neo-Lorentzianism, one of the reference frames is privileged in the sense that it gets the simultaneity facts right. On this view, one particular reference frame is objectively and absolutely correct. So the neo-Lorentzian view vindicates the common sense idea that simultaneity claims are absolute.

Most scientists—and most philosophers—believe that special relativity, rather than the neo-Lorentzian view, is true. They say that the neo-Lorentzian view is unnecessarily complex. It posits an additional metaphysical fact—a fact about which reference frame gets things absolutely correct—that doesn’t make a difference to the empirical predictions of the theory. Special relativity “gets the job done” with less machinery. So if we follow Ockham in thinking that simpler hypotheses should be given more credence than complex ones, we will give more credence to special relativity than to the neo-Lorentzian view. This, in fact, is what most scientists and philosophers do, and for this reason they give up the common sense idea that simultaneity is absolute.

With these facts on the table, we can now ask the crucial question: does the argument from special relativity against the absoluteness of simultaneity rely crucially on
a philosophical assumption? I think that it does. In particular, it relies on the philosophical assumption that simpler hypotheses should be preferred over complex ones. Anyone who gives up the view that simultaneity is absolute on the basis of special relativity must have a reason for preferring special relativity to the neo-Lorentzian view. The reason standardly given is that special relativity is simpler. Without the further claim that simpler theories should be preferred, we simply don’t have any reason to give up the common sense idea that simultaneity is absolute. So the defender of special relativity must think that a philosophical assumption—the claim that simpler theories should be preferred over complex ones—is more epistemically powerful than a common sense proposition.

Here’s another way to make the point. Suppose that this philosophical assumption were not more powerful than the common sense claim. In that case, one should reason as follows: well, the idea that simpler theories are preferable does have some plausibility to it. But if this is true, then we have to prefer special relativity to the neo-Lorentzian view, since it is simpler. But this would force us to give up the common sense idea that simultaneity is absolute. This common sense claim is more powerful than the philosophical assumption that simpler theories are preferable. So, I will retain belief in the common sense claim, give up my preference for simpler theories, and then believe what the empirical evidence forces me to believe, namely, that the neo-Lorentzian view is true. Most philosophers, however, do not reason in this manner. Since they think we should accept special relativity, I conclude that they must think that the philosophical preference for simplicity is more powerful than the common sense notion that simultaneity is absolute.

So, we see that the insistence by Kelly, Lycan, and Gupta that observational evidence is more powerful than philosophical claims, and their pointing out that science, unlike philosophy, appeals to observational evidence, is beside the point. No matter how much observational evidence is appealed to in a scientific argument against common sense, as long as the argument relies crucially on a philosophical assumption, then, if the argument is to succeed, this philosophical assumption must be more powerful than the targeted proposition of common sense.

The next section of this chapter will be devoted to presenting and replying to a variety of ways in which one might object to the argument I’ve just given. But first, before closing this section, I’ll briefly address the question of how general this phenomenon might be. That is, is the argument for special relativity unique among scientific arguments in its reliance on philosophical assumptions? Or is the phenomenon more widespread?

I think there is a general reason to suspect that the phenomenon is widespread. Scientific arguments against common sense typically proceed by noting that a currently accepted scientific hypothesis is in conflict with common sense. However, scientific hypotheses are generally not logically entailed by the data that support them. Moreover, it is usually only the full-blown hypothesis that conflicts with common sense, rather than the data themselves. This is true in many other commonly cited examples of the overturning of common sense by science: astronomical hypotheses according to which the earth is round, rather than flat, and according to which the earth orbits the sun, rather than vice versa; and the hypothesis that tables, chairs, and other objects are mostly empty space, rather than solid.
Since it is only the full-blown hypothesis and not the empirical data that conflicts with common sense, there will be an empirically equivalent competitor hypothesis that vindicates common sense. If so, then a philosophical assumption will be required if the non-common-sensical theory is preferred. Such an assumption will likely be an epistemological principle about theory choice, such as the claim that one hypothesis explains the data better and should for that reason be preferred; or that one hypothesis is simpler, more internally coherent, or better unified with other accepted theories, and that these constitute reasons for preferring it; etc. So, although this is not essential for my argument, I suspect that the reliance of science on philosophy is not an isolated phenomenon restricted to a few cases like special relativity, but is rather the norm.

Let’s take stock. I have argued that the paradigm example of a successful scientific argument against common sense—the argument for special relativity—relies crucially on a philosophical assumption, namely the assumption that simpler hypotheses should be preferred over complex ones. Anyone who accepts special relativity on the basis of the scientific argument for it is committed to thinking that this philosophical assumption is more epistemically powerful than the common sense idea that simultaneity is absolute. If so, then there could be a successful argument against a common sense proposition that relied only on philosophical assumptions. If each of its premises are at least as powerful as the claim that simpler theories should be preferred, then a philosophical argument against common sense will succeed.

One upshot of this result is that one can’t dismiss arguments like the argument for external world skepticism just on the grounds that its premises are purely philosophical. Rather, one must carefully consider the status of each of its premises in comparison to the common sense claim that we know we have hands—and, crucially, in comparison to the status of the philosophical assumptions required by the scientific arguments that one accepts.

It is not my purpose here to deliver a final verdict on the success of the skeptical argument, so I will not undertake an in-depth comparison here. However, I will note that, on the face of it, things don’t look at all bad for the skeptic. Take, for example, one of key premises in one version of the argument for skepticism: the claim that propositions about the way things appear to us—for example, the proposition that it appears as though I have a hand—are evidentially neutral between the hypothesis that things really are the way they appear (I really do have a hand) and the hypothesis that I am a brain in a vat being fed misleading appearances as of a hand. This claim is extremely compelling. How could the appearance of a hand be evidence for one of these hypotheses over the other, when both predict that I would have exactly this appearance? Compare this claim, now, with the claim that we ought to prefer simpler theories over complex ones. While this claim is accepted by many philosophers, to me it seems if anything it is less obviously correct than the skeptic’s premise just mentioned. If this claim is powerful enough to overturn a common sense proposition, then it seems to me that the skeptic’s claim is as well.

Of course, there is much more that could be said on this topic—for example, one might try to argue in response that the common sense claim that simultaneity is absolute was antecedently less powerful than the claim that I know I have hands, and so it may not suffice for the skeptic’s premises to be as powerful as the scientist’s philosophical

---

18 I do so in Rinard (unpublished manuscript).
assumptions. My point here is just that once we have seen that, as in the case of special relativity, philosophical assumptions can be more powerful than common sense, skeptical arguments and other philosophical attacks on common sense can no longer be dismissed out of hand. A careful and serious investigation into the epistemic status of their premises needs to be undertaken, and, at the outset, it is not at all clear that these premises won’t in the end stand victorious.

7. Objections and Replies

Objection 1:

The argument just given presupposes that the scientific argument for special relativity relies crucially on the philosophical assumption that simpler theories should be preferred to complex ones. However (says the objector), not all arguments for special relativity rely on this assumption. The following is a perfectly valid argument: (1) [empirical scientific data]; (2) If [empirical scientific data], then special relativity is true; therefore, (3) special relativity is true.

Reply:

Let’s think more about the status of premise (2) in the objector’s argument. We’ll assume that the person considering the argument is a scientist or philosopher aware of the existence of the neo-Lorentzian view. What reason could such a person have for believing (2)? After all, the empirical data are entailed by both special relativity and neo-Lorentzianism. It seems to me that such a person must think that special relativity has some other feature, that neo-Lorentzianism does not have, such that hypotheses with that feature should be given greater credence. But, whatever the feature, the claim that hypotheses with this feature should be given greater credence will be a philosophical, epistemological claim. If one doesn’t believe a philosophical claim of this kind, then one would not believe (2), and the argument wouldn’t go through. So I claim that any argument for special relativity must rely at least implicitly on a philosophical assumption.

Objection 2:

I concede (says the objector) that the scientific argument for special relativity relies on a philosophical assumption. However, we have more reason to believe the philosophical assumptions that are typically appealed to in scientific arguments against common sense than the philosophical assumptions that typically appear in philosophical arguments against common sense. This is because science has such an impressive track record. Every time we use a laptop or walk over a bridge, we are getting evidence that scientists know what they are doing, and that we should believe whatever theories and philosophical assumptions are endorsed by science. We have no similar reason for believing the assumptions made by philosophers, since philosophy as a discipline does not have a similar track-record.

Reply:
According to the objector, it is in virtue of science’s long and impressive track-record of success that we should believe the philosophical assumptions that appear in scientific arguments like the argument for special relativity. If the objector is right, this means that in the absence of such a track record, we would have no reason to believe these assumptions. But I don’t think this is right, and I don’t think my opponents would agree with this either.

Consider a hypothetical scenario in which human history went quite differently. Let’s suppose that the very first scientist to appear managed to acquire the empirical evidence that actual scientists now take to constitute their reason to believe special relativity. Let’s suppose that after reflecting on this evidence, the first scientist developed the theory of special relativity. She also developed and considered the neo-Lorentzian view, but reasoned that special relativity should be preferred because it was simpler and more elegant. Now, given that this scientist is working in a society that does not have a long track-record of the success of science, according to the objection just given, this scientist has no reason to believe her philosophical assumption that simpler theories are to be preferred. However, I think the scientists and philosophers who believe special relativity today would agree that this first scientist would be entirely justified in assuming that simpler theories should be preferred, and giving up her common sense beliefs on that basis. If so, then a long track-record is not required for science to overturn common sense, and the objection fails.

Objection 3:

You (says the objector) have argued that anyone who gives up the common sense idea that simultaneity is absolute must do so on the basis of an argument that relies crucially on philosophical assumptions. But you assumed that the person in question was a scientist or philosopher familiar with the neo-Lorentzian view. However, many lay people have given up the absoluteness of simultaneity without having the faintest idea of what neo-Lorentzianism is, or even what special relativity is, just on the basis of the testimony of scientists or teachers. Surely they didn’t have to rely on any assumptions about the relative merit of simple and complex scientific theories, but it was rational nonetheless for them to give up the common sense idea that simultaneity is absolute.

Reply:

First, note that my argument does not require that everyone who rationally gives up the absoluteness of simultaneity must do so on the basis of an argument that relies on philosophical assumptions. It is enough that one could rationally do so on the basis of an argument that does rely on philosophical assumptions, as that alone is sufficient to show that philosophical assumptions can be more powerful than common sense.

However, as a matter of fact, I do think the layperson described by the objector is relying, at least implicitly, on some philosophical assumptions, although they may be quite different from the assumptions relied on by the scientist. For example, she is relying on the assumption that testimony is a legitimate way to acquire justified beliefs. This is an epistemological claim.
Objection 4:

The scientists' philosophical assumptions are more powerful than the philosophers' because there is more agreement about them.

Reply:

As in my reply to objection 1, we can consider a hypothetical scenario in which there is no established scientific community, nor even an established intellectual community. According to the objector, a philosophical assumption is strong enough to overturn common sense only when there is consensus about it. But I think even my opponents would agree that a lone scientist, in ignorance of what anyone else thinks of the idea that simpler theories are preferable, could, if in possession of the right empirical evidence, rationally come to believe special relativity by relying in part on philosophical claims. This shows that it is not in virtue of the consensus in the scientific community that philosophical assumptions can be more powerful than common sense.

At this point, the objector may concede that consensus is not required for one to be justified in the assumption that simpler theories should be preferred to complex ones. However, the objector may then claim that the presence of significant disagreement would suffice to undermine one's justification in this philosophical assumption. Moreover, says the objector, since there is significant disagreement about the philosophical assumptions that are employed in philosophical arguments against common sense, this undermines any justification we might otherwise have had for accepting these arguments. On this view, philosophy can't overturn common sense (even though science can) because there is significant disagreement about the philosophical assumptions made in philosophical arguments.

Once again, however, I think the objector is committed to some implausible claims about certain hypothetical scenarios. Suppose that, when special relativity was initially presented to the scientific community, there was significant disagreement about whether the theory should be accepted. Many—perhaps most—scientists thought the theory too absurd to take seriously, and so did not give up their belief that simultaneity is absolute. The objector is committed to thinking that, in such a case, the initial proponent of special relativity would not be justified in believing it. However, this does not seem right. It can be rational for scientists (and philosophers) to maintain their views even in the face of significant disagreement. Since disagreement would not be sufficient to undermine justification in the philosophical assumptions required by scientific arguments against common sense, it is not sufficient to undermine justification in the premises of philosophical arguments against common sense.

Objection 5:

I concede that special relativity has overturned our belief that simultaneity is absolute. The claim that simultaneity is absolute may be plausible, but it is not as basic, as robust, or as central to our way of thinking as the kind of common sense beliefs that philosophers attempt to undermine, such as the belief that I know I have hands or the
belief that tables exist. Science may be able to undermine widely-accepted propositions that are highly plausible—like the proposition that tables are solid, that the earth is flat, that the sun orbits the earth, and that simultaneity is absolute, but even science couldn’t undermine the real “hard core” of common sense that philosophical arguments target. So examples from science like the example of special relativity don’t really go any way towards making it more plausible that philosophical arguments like the skeptical argument could succeed.

Reply:

This objector is objecting to premise (1) of the simple statement of my argument as it appears at the beginning of section 5, which is the premise that science can overturn common sense. According to the objector, there is a “hard core” of common sense that can’t be overturned by any sort of inquiry, either scientific or philosophical, and this “hard core” includes propositions in conflict with external world skepticism and ontological nihilism.

Many of my opponents accept premise (1), and so I have simply presupposed it up until this point, for reasons of dialectical effectiveness. However, I think this objector makes a good point, and so I’ll take up the issue here.

I don’t want to rest my case on this, but I want to begin by saying that it’s not obvious that special relativity isn’t in conflict with propositions just as central and basic as the proposition that I know I have hands. Consider an ordinary simultaneity proposition like the following: Andrew and I are brushing our teeth at the same time. One might think—indeed, this is my view—that this proposition, as ordinarily understood, could be true only if it is objectively and absolutely true that Andrew and I are brushing our teeth at the same time. If so, then it is not merely the abstract and theoretical-sounding proposition that simultaneity is absolute that is in conflict with special relativity; rather, this theory is in conflict with propositions as ordinary, simple, and plausible as any day-to-day simultaneity claim.

Consider, also, the astronomical hypothesis that the earth orbits the sun. One might be inclined to think that if this hypothesis is true, then my bed is not in the same place it was yesterday. After all, the earth has moved somewhat, and so the region of space formerly occupied by my bed is now occupied by something else. But the claim that my bed is in the same place it was yesterday seems to me on par with the claim that I know I have hands. This gives us some reason for being skeptical of the objector’s claim that the propositions overturned by science are not part of the “hard core” of common sense that philosophers have attempted to undermine.

19 Similarly, one might think that ethical relativism is off the table because, as ordinarily understood, propositions like “Torture is wrong” are true only if true absolutely. Part of what one is asserting when one asserts that torture is wrong is that torture is wrong according to all legitimate perspectives.

20 Special relativity also entails that nothing can go faster than the speed of light. This may also seem to conflict with some very basic commonsensical ideas. For example, suppose I am on a train going almost as fast as the speed of light (but not quite) and I shoot a gun in the direction of the train’s movement whose bullets go half as fast as the speed of light. It seems like the bullet should end up going faster than the speed of light. But according to special relativity, this is impossible. (Thanks to Brad Skow for suggesting that I include this example.)
But I don’t want to rest my case on these claims. Rather, I will argue that there could be successful scientific arguments against the very claims that, according to the objector, are in the “hard core” of common sense, and that these scientific arguments rely crucially on philosophical assumptions.

Consider, for example, one of the common sense claims that the skeptic aims to undermine: I know I have hands. Epistemologists agree that one could get empirical evidence against this claim. For example, suppose one is told by a reliable source that doctors have found a way to cure cancer by manufacturing a drug that requires some part of a real human hand. People are being asked to donate their hands to the cause, so that enough of this drug can be manufactured to cure everyone of cancer. Those who agree to donate their hands are told they will undergo a surgical procedure under general anesthesia which involves the removal of their hands and the replacement of them with fake hands, which look and feel exactly like real hands, and from which there is no recovery period. (We can imagine that surgery has become quite advanced.) You agree to donate your hands. When you wake up in the hospital bed, you look down at the ends of your arms, and find that what appear to be your hands look and function exactly as they always have, just as you were told they would. In this case, I think you should believe that you do not have real hands (just fake hands), and so give up the common sense belief that you know you have hands. Moreover, in giving up this belief you are (at least implicitly) relying on the epistemological assumption that the fake-hand hypothesis is better supported by your evidence than the empirically equivalent conspiracy theory according to which the doctors are all lying to you and your hands were never removed in the first place.

Here’s another example in which one could get empirical evidence against the common sense belief that one has hands. Suppose you wake up one morning and find a ticker-tape across the bottom of your visual field. The tape reads: “Your brain has been removed from your body and put in a nutrient-filled vat. Your sensory experiences are being fed to you by our vat-tending scientists.” The tape goes on to make all sorts of predictions about what your sensory experience will be like, and these predictions all come true. In such a case, I think one should believe that one is a brain in a vat, and so give up all of the common sense beliefs that are incompatible with that claim. But, once again, in doing so one must rely at least implicitly on an epistemological claim according to which the BIV hypothesis is more worthy of belief, given your evidence, than the hypothesis that things really are as they seem, and that the ticker-tape is not reliable. (Perhaps, according to this alternative hypothesis, you are hallucinating the ticker-tape due to some kind of psychological ailment.)

It is worth pointing out about the kind of epistemological assumptions featured in these cases are very similar in kind to the types of epistemological assumptions typically appealed to in philosophical arguments for skepticism. For example, the skeptic may employ the premise that your current sensory evidence is neutral between the BIV hypothesis and the hypothesis that things are as they appear. The epistemological assumptions appealed to in the above-described empirical arguments against common sense are claims of a similar kind: claims about which hypotheses about the nature of the real world are best supported by the evidence of your senses.

---

21 This example is not original to me, but I can’t remember where I first heard it.
This completes my reply to this objection. I have argued that there could be successful empirical arguments against the very same common sense propositions that philosophical arguments seek to undermine. Moreover, these empirical arguments rely crucially on philosophical assumptions. So, in the relevant sense, science can overturn common sense and premise (1) of the argument remains intact.

8. Summary and Concluding Remarks

It has become popular to think of common sense as an oracle to which the philosopher must always defer. If a philosopher’s theory turns out to conflict with common sense, the philosopher is taken to have overstepped her bounds and is expected to retreat. It has been my aim in this chapter to convince the reader that this conception of philosophy is untenable. Philosophical argument is perfectly capable of undermining our ordinary, pre-theoretic view of the world.

In the first half of the chapter, I objected to the main motivations philosophers have given for thinking that philosophy is not powerful enough to overturn common sense. These motivations all turned out to rely on faulty theories of philosophical methodology. In the second half of the chapter, I argued that if (as my opponents agree) science can overturn common sense, then so can philosophy.

One consequence is that we cannot simply dismiss out of hand philosophical arguments—like arguments for skepticism and arguments for ontological nihilism—that target common sense claims. We cannot know in advance that our ordinary beliefs will stand fast in the face of such arguments; only careful and detailed consideration of these arguments can reveal whether or not they succeed. This brings a heightened sense of importance and urgency to philosophical inquiry. Nothing less than our most basic and central beliefs are at stake.
Reasoning One’s Way out of Skepticism

0. Introduction

What can be said to someone who accepts the traditional philosophical argument for external world skepticism? This person suspends judgment on every external world proposition—she is uncertain about whether she has hands, whether there are trees, whether there are other people, etc. Is there any line of reasoning that could persuade someone in this position to give up her skepticism?

Many contemporary epistemologists think that it is not possible to convince the skeptic that we have knowledge of the external world, and they don’t aim to do so in their responses to skepticism. Here, for example, is Timothy Williamson:

Nothing said here should convince someone who has given up ordinary beliefs that they [ordinary external world beliefs] constitute knowledge...This is the usual case with philosophical treatments of skepticism: they are better at prevention than at cure. *If a refutation of skepticism is supposed to reason one out of the hole, then skepticism is irrefutable.*\(^{22}\) (emphasis mine)

Here is James Pryor:

The ambitious anti-skeptical project is to refute the skeptic on his own terms, that is, to establish that we can justifiably believe and know such things as that there is a hand, using only premises that the skeptic allows us to use. The prospects for this ambitious anti-skeptical project seem somewhat dim...Most fallibilists concede that we *can’t demonstrate to the skeptic, using only premises he’ll accept, that we have any perceptual knowledge....the ambitious anti-skeptical project cannot succeed.*\(^{23}\) (emphasis mine)

It is my aim to do what these (and other) epistemologists think can’t be done. I think that it *is* possible to rationally persuade the external world skeptic that we have external world knowledge. The primary aim of this chapter is to argue that rationality requires us to believe that skepticism is false, while appealing only to premises that even an external world skeptic should accept. My strategy is to argue that accepting the argument for external world skepticism ultimately commits one to accepting more extreme forms of skepticism that are self-undermining.

First I argue that it is not rational to accept the argument for external world skepticism. In section 1 I present the argument for skepticism about the external world, and show that there is a parallel argument for skepticism about the past. So, I claim, if one accepts external world skepticism, one ought to also accept skepticism about the past. In section 2 I argue that anyone who accepts skepticism about the past should also accept skepticism about complex reasoning. In section 3 I argue that it would be self-undermining to accept skepticism about complex reasoning on the basis of this argument from skepticism about the past, since this argument is complex. In particular, if one

---

22 Williamson (2000, 27)
23 Pryor (2000, 517 and 520)
accepts the argument for skepticism about complex reasoning, one will end up believing a proposition P while at the same time believing that one should not believe P. This is not a rational combination of beliefs. So, I conclude (in section 4) that it is not rational to accept the argument for external world skepticism, because doing so ultimately commits one to having an irrational combination of beliefs. Section 5 contains objections and replies.

In Section 6, I go on to argue that it would not be rational to suspend judgment on skepticism. This, combined with the conclusion of the argument presented earlier in Sections 1 – 4, entails that if there is any doxastic attitude one could rationally take towards external world skepticism, it is disbelief. In Section 7 I argue that, in general, for any proposition P, there must be at least one doxastic attitude one could rationally take towards P. Applied to the case at hand, and combined with the conditional just mentioned, this entails that one must believe that skepticism is false.

This may remind some readers of Crispin Wright's 1991 paper "Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon." However, the structure of my argument is very different from Wright's, and I think that Wright's project faces serious difficulties.\(^{24}\)

Before moving on to the first step of my argument, I want to point out one final difference between my project and most recent anti-skeptical projects. As noted earlier, many—perhaps most—contemporary epistemologists do not claim that their arguments could convince an external world skeptic. In this respect, my project is more ambitious than theirs. However, there is another respect in which my project is less ambitious. Unlike many recent anti-skeptics, I don't try to diagnose the flaw in the skeptical argument—I don't isolate a particular premise as false, and explain why, despite its falsity, we found it so compelling. In this respect (and probably this respect alone) my project is similar to that of G.E. Moore,\(^{25}\) who also claimed to establish that we should reject the skeptic's conclusion, but did not in the process diagnose the flaw in the skeptic's argument.

1. **External world skepticism leads to skepticism about the past**

   In this section I will argue that if it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is rational to accept skepticism about the past.

   I will begin by presenting a standard version of the argument for external world skepticism. Then I will show that there is an analogous argument for skepticism about the past.\(^{26}\) Anyone who is convinced by the former argument should also be convinced by the latter.

---

\(^{24}\) Wright sets up the argument for external world skepticism in an unusual way. There is a different, more common version of the argument which I think is superior to Wright's version, and to which Wright's criticisms do not apply. So I think Wright fails to identify a serious problem for external world skepticism. Wright's project is criticized in Brueckner (1992), Pritchard (2001) and Tymoczko and Vogel (1992). A version of the objection just mentioned appears in Tymoczko and Vogel.

\(^{25}\) See, for example, Moore (1962).

\(^{26}\) There are in the literature many different ways of formulating the argument for external world skepticism. The version I have presented here is, I think, one of the strongest and most fully developed. But the different formulations all share a central basic strategy (originating in Descartes (1996)), and I think this same basic strategy works equally well to motivate skepticism about the past, regardless of the details of the way in which the argument is formulated.
Most people have many beliefs about the external world. For example, most people tend to believe that the objects they seem to see before them, like hands and tables and trees, really are there. I'll call the possibility in which the external world is largely as you believe it to be the Normal World scenario.

Consider now an alternative possibility in which the way things appear to you is exactly the same, but all of your external world beliefs are false. In this scenario you are merely a bodiless brain in a vat, created by an evil scientist bent on deceiving you about the nature of your surroundings. I'll call this possibility the BIV scenario.

The skeptic's first premise is as follows:

(1) One's basic evidence about the external world is restricted to propositions about the way the external world appears to one.

The skeptic goes on to claim that this evidence is neutral between the Normal World hypothesis and the BIV hypothesis; it doesn't favor one over the other. After all, both hypotheses entail that one has the perceptual evidence that one does, e.g. that one seems to see hands, tables, chairs, etc. Because there is no asymmetry in the degree to which the hypotheses predict the evidence, there is no asymmetry in the degree to which the evidence supports the hypotheses. Here is the skeptic's second premise:

(2) Propositions about the way the external world appears to one are evidentially neutral between the Normal World hypothesis and the BIV hypothesis.

The third premise is as follows:

(3) Neither the Normal World hypothesis nor the BIV hypothesis is intrinsically more worthy of belief, independently of one's evidence.

---

27 Strictly speaking, not all of your external world beliefs are false in this scenario. For example, in the BIV scenario as I've described it, your belief that there is an external cause of your appearances is true. It's an interesting question whether there is a possible scenario in which every one of your external world beliefs is false, but it's not a question I'll take up here.

28 What do I mean by basic evidence? E is part of one's basic evidence for H just in case E is part of one's evidence for H, and E is not believed on the basis of further evidence. The idea behind (1) is just that, whatever the justificatory structure of one's external world beliefs, it all bottoms out in appearances; appearances are the only original source of justificatory fluid, to use a metaphor from Field (1998).

29 I use the phrase "the degree to which the evidence supports the hypothesis" to pick out the notion of incremental support, not overall support. On this picture, the overall worthiness of belief of a hypothesis H depends both on (1) how worthy it is of belief, independently of one's evidence and (2) how much incremental support is accorded to the hypothesis as a result of learning one's evidence.

30 Features that are sometimes thought to make one hypothesis intrinsically more worthy of belief than another include the overall simplicity of the hypothesis and the degree to which its different parts hang together well (are unified or coherent). In putting forward premise (3), the skeptic is either denying that the normal world hypothesis is simpler or more unified than the BIV hypothesis, or denying that differences of this kind make for greater worthiness of belief.
From (1) – (3), it follows that one neither knows, nor is justified in believing, that the BIV hypothesis is false. From here we need just one more premise to yield full-on external world skepticism:

(4) If one neither knows nor is justified in believing Q, and one knows that P entails Q, then one must neither know nor be justified in believing P.

This final premise, often called the closure principle, is highly compelling; after all, if one did know P or believe it with justification, then one would deduce Q from it, and thereby come to know Q (or believe it with justification).

(1) – (4) yield the skeptic’s conclusion:

(5) For every external world proposition P, no one could ever know or be justified in believing P.

I will now present an argument for skepticism about the past that is perfectly analogous to the argument for skepticism about the external world.

First, consider a more detailed version of the BIV scenario described above. In addition to deceiving you about your external surroundings, we now suppose that the evil scientist also wants to deceive you about your past. Due to budgetary constraints, the scientist can afford to keep your brain in existence for only one minute; but, since he wants to simulate a typical human experience, he implanted your brain with false apparent memories such that what it’s like to have these apparent memories is exactly the same as what it’s like for you in the Normal World scenario to really remember what happened to you. I’ll call this more detailed version of the BIV scenario the BIV(NoPast) scenario. The role that the BIV(NoPast) scenario plays in the argument for skepticism about the past is exactly the same as the role that the BIV scenario plays in the argument for skepticism about the external world.

We will also make a further stipulation about the Normal World scenario, for the purpose of contrasting it with the BIV(NoPast) scenario. In the following discussion, “Normal World scenario” will refer to a scenario in which the past, as well as the external world, is largely as you believe it to be.

We can now formulate the argument for skepticism about the past. We simply take our argument for external world skepticism, and replace “the external world” with “the past,” and substitute BIV(NoPast) for BIV:

(1*) One’s evidence about the past is restricted to propositions about the way the past appears to one (i.e. the way one seems to remember things to have been).

31 Of course, that’s not to say it hasn’t been contested. Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981) are two prominent deniers of the closure principle for knowledge. Note, however, that it is far less common, and far more implausible, to deny that justification is closed. The argument for skepticism about justification remains intact even if closure for knowledge is rejected.

32 Perhaps the most famous skeptical scenario concerning the past is Russell’s (1921, 159) five-minute world hypothesis, according to which the world sprang into existence five minutes ago, complete with a group of people who seem to remember what we actually remember.
(2*) Propositions about the way the past appears to one are evidentially neutral between the Normal World hypothesis and the BIV(NoPast) hypothesis.

(3*) Neither the Normal World hypothesis nor the BIV(NoPast) hypothesis is intrinsically more worthy of belief, independently of one’s evidence.

(4*) If one neither knows nor is justified in believing Q, and one knows that P entails Q, then one must neither know nor be justified in believing P.

Therefore,

(5*) One neither knows nor is justified in believing any proposition about the past.

Anyone who accepts the premises of the argument for external world skepticism ((1) – (4)) is thereby committed to accepting the premises of the argument for skepticism about the past ((1*) – (4*)). It would be unacceptably arbitrary to accept (1) while rejecting (1*). (2*) can be given the same justification that was given for (2). Any reason one might have for rejecting (3*) would provide an equally good reason for rejecting (3), so one who accepts (3) should also accept (3*). (4) and (4*) are identical.

In this section, I have argued for the following claim:

Claim I: If it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is rational to accept skepticism about the past.

2. Skepticism about the past leads to skepticism about complex reasoning

In this section I will argue that if it’s rational to accept skepticism about the past, then it’s rational to accept skepticism about complex reasoning. The rough idea behind the argument is this: In complex reasoning one relies on one’s memory. But if skepticism about the past is true, one is not justified in relying on one’s memory, and so not justified in believing the conclusions of complex reasoning.

First I will say what I mean by complex reasoning, and what I mean by skepticism about complex reasoning. For my purposes, a piece of reasoning counts as complex just in case it involves multiple steps such that not all of these steps can be held in one’s head at once. For example, suppose one begins with the assumption that A is true, and then infers (either deductively or inductively) B from A, C from B, and so on, and finally concludes that G is true. Suppose that, by the time one infers G from F, one no longer has in one’s head the details of the argument by which one reasoned from A to G; one simply seems to remember having done so. Then the reasoning from A to G counts as complex. Most proofs in math and logic are examples of complex reasoning; so are long inductive arguments for, say, the claim that global warming will occur, or the claim that the stock market will have an average annual return of at least 8% over the next century. Most interesting philosophical arguments are complex.

Skepticism about complex reasoning is the view that no one could ever know, or be justified in believing, any proposition on the basis of complex reasoning. That is, one
could not come to know, or come to be justified in believing, a proposition P as a result of having reasoned through a complex argument for P.

I will now present an argument for skepticism about complex reasoning which has skepticism about the past as a premise. Let G be the conclusion of an arbitrary complex argument. Consider an agent who is initially not justified in believing G. She then carefully and correctly goes through the argument for G. Since the argument is complex, at the moment she concludes that G is true, she doesn’t have in her head the earlier steps of the argument. She merely seems to remember that she went through some argument or other for G. But if skepticism about the past is true, she is not justified in trusting her apparent memory, because she is not justified in believing any proposition about the past. For all she knows, she hasn’t even been in existence long enough to have gone through an argument for G. So, by the time she concludes that G is true, she is not justified in believing it.

So, if skepticism about the past is true, then despite having gone through a complex argument for G, the agent is not justified in believing it. Since we made no assumptions about the argument other than that it was complex, it follows from skepticism about the past that one cannot come to be justified in believing a proposition as a result of having gone through a complex argument for it.33

Any skeptic about the past should accept this argument for skepticism about complex reasoning.

Some readers may have lingering doubts about one crucial step in the above argument. The following was required to get from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning:

(*) If an agent does not have in her head the argument for G, is not justified in trusting her apparent memory that she went through an argument for G, and has no independent reason for believing G, then she is not justified in believing G, even if she did in fact go through a good argument for G.

The following case helps bring out the plausibility of this claim. As before, consider an agent who has gone through a complex argument for G; prior to going through the argument, he was not justified in believing G. At the moment he concludes that G is true, he does not have in his head the argument for G. Since we’re not skeptics about the past, most of us think that he’s justified in trusting his apparent memory that he went through some argument for G, and thus justified in believing G. Let us suppose, however, that he learns that he was given a “faulty memory” pill, which tends to cause one to remember things that did not in fact happen. I think we should all agree that in light of this information, the agent is not justified in believing G. Moreover, I think it’s clear that the way this information undermines his justification for G is by undermining his justification for trusting his apparent memory that he went through an argument for G. Crucially, it is because the agent is not justified in believing that he went through an argument for G that he is not justified in believing G. The assumption that (*) is true

33 Since knowledge requires justification, showing that one cannot become justified in a proposition on the basis of complex reasoning suffices to show that one cannot come to know the proposition on the basis of complex reasoning.
provides the best explanation for the fact that the agent is not justified in believing G in this case.  

The claim that the agent in this case is not justified in believing G, and claim (*), would both be rejected by a certain kind of reliabilist. According to this reliabilist, having come to believe P via a reliable process is always sufficient for justification in P, even if one has good reason to doubt that one went through a reliable process, as in the case just described.

Although I am not much tempted by this reliabilist view, for my purposes I do not need to assume that it is false, since I do not need to assume that (*) is correct. I need assume only that any skeptic about the past would accept (*), since my goal is to show that any skeptic about the past would accept the above argument for skepticism about complex reasoning, which relies on (*). No skeptic about the past would accept this reliabilist view of justification, since such a view straightforwardly conflicts with skepticism about the past. Since only reliabilists would be tempted to reject (*), we can be sure that any skeptic about the past would accept it.  

In this section, I have defended the following claim:

Claim II: If it’s rational to accept skepticism about the past, then it’s rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

3. It is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning

In section 2 I described an argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning. In this section I will argue that it would not be rational to accept this argument.

First, notice that this argument is itself a complex argument. Since its conclusion is the claim that one ought not accept complex arguments, there is a sense in which the argument is self-undermining. As I will show in this section, the self-undermining

---

34 One might think that (*) would be rejected by Tyler Burge, given his stance in a well-known dispute with Roderick Chisholm (see Burge (1993) and Chisholm (1977)). However, I think both Burge and Chisholm would accept (*). Burge and Chisholm disagree about whether certain contingent propositions about the past are part of one’s justification for the conclusion of a complex argument. Chisholm says yes; Burge says no. It is clear that Chisholm would accept (*). Although Burge denies that propositions about the past are part of one’s justification for G, he does allow that there is some sense in which one relies on one’s memory in complex reasoning. In particular, he thinks that if one has a good positive reason for doubting one’s memory, then one should not believe the conclusions of complex reasoning. This is basically what (*) says. As written, the antecedent of (*) says that an agent is not justified in believing what she seems to remember. That is, it is not rational for the agent to believe what she seems to remember. On Burge’s view, if this is true, then it must be that S has a good positive reason for doubting her memory. Burge agrees that the consequent of (*) follows from this (the consequent of (*) says that the agent should not believe the conclusion of a complex argument). So Burge would agree with (*).

35 I should say that strictly speaking, one could, without logical inconsistency, hold the position that reliabilism is true for propositions believed on the basis of a complex argument, but false for propositions believed on the basis of memory. However, in the absence of some reason for thinking that reliabilism holds in the former case but fails in the latter case, I think this position is unacceptably arbitrary.
character of this argument manifests itself in the fact that if one accepts it, one will end up believing a proposition P while at the same time believing that one should not believe P. This is an irrational combination of beliefs. So it would not be rational to accept this argument, since anyone who does so will end up with an irrational combination of beliefs.

Let us suppose, then, that one were to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to complex reasoning skepticism. Let P be the conclusion of this argument (i.e. the thesis of skepticism about complex reasoning). At the moment one accepts P, one knows that one is not accepting it on the basis of a simple argument. After all, if one were accepting it on the basis of a simple argument, one would have all of the steps of that argument in one’s head at the moment one accepts P. However, one can tell at the moment of acceptance that one does not have in one’s head all the steps of an argument for P.

Since one knows that one is not accepting P on the basis of a simple argument, one knows that one of the two remaining possibilities obtains: either one is accepting P on the basis of a complex argument, or one’s acceptance of P is not based on any argument at all. Since one is a skeptic about complex reasoning, one believes that if the first possibility obtains, one is not justified in believing P. Consider now the second possibility. Recall that P is the proposition that skepticism about complex reasoning is true. Perhaps there are some propositions one could rationally come to believe without basing one’s belief on an argument ($2 + 2 = 4$ is a candidate), but if there are, skepticism about complex reasoning is not one of them. It is a highly surprising claim, far from obvious. So one also believes that if the second possibility obtains, one is not justified in believing P. So, one believes that one is not justified in believing P, no matter which of these two possibilities obtains.

That is, at the moment one accepts the conclusion of the argument for skepticism about complex reasoning, one believes P and one also believes that one’s belief in P is not justified. But this is clearly not a rational combination of beliefs. So one should not accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning, because if one were to do so, one would end up with an irrational combination of beliefs.

The argument just presented relies crucially on the following principle:

**Anti-Denouncement:** It is not rational to believe a proposition P while also believing that it is not rational for one to believe P.

The idea behind this principle is that it is not rational for one to denounce one’s own belief, in the sense of believing it to be irrational. It is very natural to think that this principle is correct, and it is not my purpose in this chapter to provide a rigorous

36 I use the phrase “S should believe P” to mean “Rationality requires that S believe P.”

37 Even if one denies this, the position one is in after accepting the argument is not rational. One believes P, but, because of one’s skepticism about the past, one suspends judgment on the proposition that one came to believe P on the basis of a complex argument. That is, one suspends judgment on the proposition that one shouldn’t believe P (since one believes one shouldn’t believe propositions on the basis of complex arguments). But it is not rational to believe a proposition P while suspending judgment on whether one should believe P. This violates Belief Endorsement, a plausible principle of epistemic rationality that appears in section 6.
argument for Anti-Denouncement capable of convincing someone who disagrees with it. However, reflection on cases of the following kind may help to bring out the plausibility of this principle.

Imagine someone—let’s call him Bill—who’s wondering whether it would be a good idea for him to invest his retirement savings in the stock market. He’s sure of the following conditional claim: If the market will have an average annual return of at least 8% over the next few decades, then he ought to invest his savings in the market. Naturally, he then turns to the question of whether the antecedent of this conditional is true.

Suppose that, upon careful consideration of the evidence available to him, Bill concludes that, given his evidence, he definitely should not believe that the market will return at least 8%. This belief, he is sure, would not be rational, given his evidence. But suppose further that, despite this, he does believe that the market will return at least 8%, and decides on that basis to invest his savings entirely in the market. I think that in this case, Bill should be regarded as epistemically irrational. A rational person would not believe that the market will return at least 8% while also believing at the same time that, given his evidence, he should believe no such thing.

This judgment about this case strongly suggests that Anti-Denouncement is true. If Anti-Denouncement were false, it’s hard to see what could be wrong with Bill’s beliefs. But it seems clear that they are not the beliefs of a rational person.

In this section I have defended the following claim:

Claim III: It is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to complex reasoning skepticism.

4. It is not rational to accept external world skepticism

To summarize, in this section I’ll bring together the three claims defended in sections 1 – 3. They entail that it is not rational to accept external world skepticism.

Claim I: If it’s rational to accept external world skepticism, then it’s rational to accept skepticism about the past.

Claim II: If it’s rational to accept skepticism about the past, then it’s rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

Subconclusion: If it’s rational to accept external world skepticism, then it’s rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

Claim III: It is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

38 Like most claims in philosophy, not everyone agrees with this principle. Weatherson (unpublished manuscript) and Williamson (forthcoming) argue against it. The principle has been defended by Feldman (2005) and Bergmann (2005). It is also discussed in Christensen (forthcoming).
Conclusion: It is not rational to accept external world skepticism.

5. Objections and Replies

In this section, I’ll present and respond to some objections to the argument just presented.

Objection I:

You claim that anyone who accepts the argument for external world skepticism is ultimately committed to believing a proposition P while at the same time believing that she should not believe P. But there is a way to accept the argument for external world skepticism without being committed to that combination of beliefs. Consider someone who thinks that there is an independent but compelling simple argument for skepticism about complex reasoning, and who also thinks (rightly or wrongly) that the argument for external world skepticism is simple. This person would accept external world skepticism on the basis of the purportedly simple argument for it, and would also accept skepticism about complex reasoning on the basis of the purportedly simple argument for it. Since she already accepts skepticism about complex reasoning for independent reasons, she would not accept the complex argument from external world skepticism to skepticism about complex reasoning. So she would not end up believing a proposition P while believing that she shouldn’t believe P.

Reply:

The position that the objector describes is rational only if there is a simple argument for skepticism about complex reasoning that could be rationally accepted. But I claim that any plausible simple argument for skepticism about complex reasoning would also be an argument for completely global skepticism. It is not rational to accept any argument for global skepticism—according to which one neither knows nor is justified in believing any proposition—because accepting this argument involves believing a proposition, which global skepticism says one ought not do. Anyone who accepts global skepticism believes a proposition P while believing that one should not believe P, which is not a rational combination of beliefs.

I will now give my reasons for thinking that any plausible simple argument for skepticism about complex reasoning would also be an argument for global skepticism. First, I am aware of only one argument for skepticism about complex reasoning which is prima facie plausible and may be considered simple, and it is clearly an argument for global skepticism. The argument is roughly as follows: For any proposition P, it is possible that an evil demon could make not-P seem just as plausible to me as P seems now. Therefore, the fact that P seems highly plausible to me now is not sufficient for me to be justified in believing P, or to know P.

So the only plausible simple argument that has so far been been formulated is also an argument for global skepticism. But there are more general reasons to think that any argument for skepticism about complex reasoning, if simple, yields global skepticism. If
a skeptical argument is to undermine only complex reasoning, and not yield global skepticism, it must introduce, describe, and make claims about features specific to complex reasoning. But this would involve complicating the argument, and so it would likely no longer be simple. Moreover, the only epistemically relevant difference between complex reasoning and simple reasoning is that the former relies on memory. So we might naturally expect any skeptical argument that is restricted to complex reasoning to go by way of skepticism about the past. But, as we saw in section 2, arguments of this type are complex.

In summary, in order for the objection to succeed, there must be a plausible argument for skepticism about complex reasoning that is simple and that doesn’t yield global skepticism. But I don’t think there is such an argument.

Objection II:

Your argument in section 3 for claim III, the claim that it is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning, rests on the assumption that this argument is complex. But it’s not clear to me that this argument is complex.

Reply:

I think it’s plausible that this argument is complex; I, at least, am not able to hold the argument in its entirety in my head at once. However, my argument would go through even on the assumption that this argument is simple, since this argument is in fact only a small part of the overall argument for skepticism about complex reasoning. The overall argument includes the argument for skepticism about the past, and the arguments for the premises of the argument for skepticism about the past (from the parallel with the argument for external world skepticism).

That is, the entire argument for skepticism about complex reasoning includes the argument for external world skepticism, the argument linking external world skepticism to skepticism about the past (consisting of conditional claims of the following form: if premise (x) of the argument for external world skepticism is true, then premise (x*) of the argument for skepticism about the past is true), the argument for skepticism about the past, and the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning. This argument is surely complex.

Objection III:

I grant that, for actual humans, the argument for skepticism about complex reasoning is complex, since we are unable to hold this entire argument in our heads at once. However, whether an argument is complex or simple is agent-relative; it is (metaphysically) possible for there to be an agent, who although in all other respects is just like us, is able to hold incredibly long arguments in her head at once. In particular, she can hold in her head the entire argument for skepticism about complex reasoning. For this agent, this argument is simple, and so it would not be self-undermining for her to accept it—there is nothing self-undermining about accepting a simple argument for
skepticism about complex reasoning. Since this agent is in all other respects just like us, we can suppose that she finds each premise of the argument individually plausible, and so, since the argument is simple for her, she will accept it, and come to believe skepticism about the external world, the past, and complex reasoning. In short: if there were an agent with certain enhanced cognitive abilities, she would be a skeptic.

The reasoning just given should be accepted by anyone who accepts the argument you’ve given. Such a person would then be in the following peculiar situation: because she accepts your argument, she thinks it would not be rational for her to believe skepticism, and so she doesn’t believe it. But, at the same time, she knows that if there were an agent just like her, except with certain enhanced cognitive abilities, then that agent would believe skepticism. This combination of beliefs is not rational, according to the following principle.

**Deference:** If one (rationally) believes that a cognitively enhanced version of oneself would believe P, then one should believe P.

Deference is very plausible. Consider the following case. Suppose you’re uncertain about whether Goldbach’s conjecture can be proved. You then learn that if there were a version of yourself with enhanced cognitive abilities—for example, enhanced mathematical abilities—that enhanced agent would believe that there is a proof of Goldbach’s conjecture. Plausibly, upon learning this information you should come to believe that there is such a proof. But if so, this suggests that Deference is true. And if Deference is true, then it would not be rational to accept the argument you’ve given.39

Reply:

I agree with the objector that Deference is plausible, and I agree that the Goldbach’s Conjecture case shows that something in the vicinity of this principle must be true. Nevertheless, we have independent reason for thinking that Deference as stated is not true. I will argue that the properly revised version of Deference does not have the consequence that anyone who accepts my argument has an irrational combination of beliefs.

First, though, I would like to note that the objector is not obviously correct in his assumption that an enhanced agent would believe skepticism. It might be that if one were enhanced in this way, one would no longer believe the skeptic’s premises. Also, even supposing that the enhanced agent would believe skepticism, the non-skeptic may have

39 For parallel reasons, the non-skeptic is committed to a possible violation of the following principle, which is in the spirit of van Fraassen’s (1984) reflection principle: Reflection: If one (rationally) believes that one’s future self will believe P, then one should believe P. Suppose the non-skeptic were offered a pill that would give her the cognitive abilities of the enhanced agent—in other words, a pill that would turn her into the enhanced agent. It would clearly be foolish to turn down such a pill—after all, it enhances one’s abilities, and, we can suppose, has no side effects. So, if the non-skeptic is offered the pill, she should decide to take it, and so should believe that her future self, who has taken the pill, will accept the argument for skepticism. So, according to Reflection, she should believe skepticism now, even before taking the pill. The dialectic here is perfectly parallel to the dialectic concerning the non-skeptic’s violation of Deference. The same kind of response I give to the objection that the non-skeptic violates Deference can be given to the objection that the non-skeptic violates Reflection.
good reasons for thinking that an ideally rational agent would not.\textsuperscript{40} (Since the enhanced agent is just like us in every respect other than this particular enhancement, she is not ideally rational.) Nevertheless, for the remainder of my reply I will assume that the objector is right to think that the enhanced agent would accept skepticism, since I think that the objection fails in any case, because the key principle on which it relies does not hold in the case of the non-skeptic.

The following consideration shows that Deference, as stated, is not true. As the objector noted, we have very good reason to think that there doesn’t actually exist any enhanced agent of the kind described in his objection. However, according to Deference, we should believe that such an agent does exist. This is because we recognize that if there were an enhanced agent, she would know that she is enhanced in a certain way, and so she would believe that an enhanced agent (namely, herself) exists. According to Deference, one should believe whatever one knows that an enhanced agent would believe, so according to Deference, one should believe that an enhanced agent actually exists. Clearly this is the wrong result, and so Deference, as stated, is not true.\textsuperscript{41, 42}

Nevertheless, the Goldbach’s conjecture case described by the objector shows that some principle in the vicinity of Deference must be true. For us, then, the crucial question is this: Will the correct version of Deference (whatever it is) still entail that it would not be rational to decline skepticism on the basis of my argument? Or is this just another example in which Deference, as originally formulated, gets the wrong result?

I think we have independent reason for thinking that the second possibility obtains. This is because there is another counterexample to Deference, and the most natural explanation for why Deference fails in this case has the consequence that Deference fails in the case of the non-skeptic as well.

Suppose one learns that, if there were an enhanced version of oneself, that enhanced agent would believe that Deference is false. In particular, the enhanced agent would believe the following: the fact that an enhanced version of oneself believes P is never a good reason for believing P. According to Deference, upon learning this, one should come to believe that Deference is false. But that is clearly not the rational response to the situation. To do this would be self-undermining. It would not be rational to believe, on the basis of Deference, that Deference is false. To do so would be to believe a proposition P (that one should never adopt a belief on the basis of Deference) while believing that one should not believe P (because the basis for one’s belief in P is that Deference says one ought to believe it).

This suggests that Deference fails in cases in which, if one were to believe what one believes that the enhanced agent would believe, one’s position would be self-...

\textsuperscript{40} Assuming that the non-skeptic believes that skepticism is false (rather than merely failing to believe that it’s true), she must believe that one of the skeptic’s premises is false. It might seem plausible that an ideally rational agent would believe every true necessary proposition. If so, then the non-skeptic must think that an ideally rational agent would disbelieve whichever premise of the skeptical argument is in fact false, and so would not be a skeptic.

\textsuperscript{41} Similar arguments appear in Plantinga (1982).

\textsuperscript{42} One might respond to this objection by modifying Deference as follows: One should believe whatever one (rationally) believes that an enhanced agent would advise one to believe. The thought is that an enhanced agent would not advise you to believe that an enhanced agent exists, even though she herself believes it. The question is then whether the enhanced agent would advise you to believe skepticism. The rest of my reply to this objection could be seen as a reason for thinking that she would not.
undermining (in the sense that one would believe P while believing that one should not believe P).

But this is true of the person who accepts my argument. Suppose this non-skeptic were to adopt the belief, on the basis of Deference, that skepticism is true. That is, suppose she were to reason as follows: An enhanced agent would believe skepticism. One should believe whatever one believes that an enhanced agent would believe. So I should believe skepticism.

If she accepts skepticism on the basis of this argument, her position is self-undermining, because the above argument for skepticism about complex reasoning is complex. (This is because it relies on the assumption that an enhanced agent would believe skepticism, and the argument for this is complex.)

I take this to show that Deference gives the wrong result in the case of the agent who, on the basis of my argument, gives up the belief that skepticism is true. This is because we have independent reason to believe that Deference fails in cases in which following it would lead one into a self-undermining position, and this is true in the case of the non-skeptic.

More can be said to explain why Deference fails in such cases. I think the plausibility of principles like Deference stems from a picture we have about the role of idealized agents in epistemology. According to this picture, the rationality of one’s position increases as one’s position becomes more similar, overall, to the position of an idealized agent. One important respect of similarity concerns the contents of one’s beliefs. Other things equal, adopting beliefs that are shared by an idealized agent makes one’s position more rational. That is why this picture makes Deference seem plausible.

But this very same picture also explains why Deference fails in certain cases. Similarity in the contents of one’s beliefs is not the only kind of similarity that counts. Moreover, sometimes, for limited agents, becoming more similar in the content of one’s beliefs involves becoming less similar in another important respect. Deference fails to take this into account; it focuses on only one respect of similarity.

The position of the limited agent, the non-skeptic, differs from the position of the enhanced agent in that the former does not believe skepticism, but the latter does. However, the positions of the limited agent and the enhanced agent are similar in the following important respect: both positions are not self-undermining. If the limited agent were to adopt the enhanced agent’s belief, her position would become less similar in this important respect, because her position would now be self-undermining. Deference fails in this case because matching beliefs would make the limited agent overall less similar to

---

43 The argument for this can be spelled out in more detail as follows. She believes a proposition, P (skepticism about complex reasoning). She knows that she does not believe P on the basis of a simple argument (the argument in the above paragraph is not simple, because it relies on the claim that an enhanced agent would believe skepticism; the argument for this is complex.). She also knows that P is not the kind of proposition that could be rationally believed on the basis of no argument. The only remaining possibility is that she believes P on the basis of a complex argument (this is in fact the case); but since she accepts skepticism about complex reasoning, she believes that in this case she should not believe P. So she believes P while believing that she should not believe P.

44 For example, consider a complex mathematical theorem M which one has no reason for believing. One shouldn’t believe M, even though an enhanced agent would (one doesn’t know that an enhanced agent would believe it.) This example makes the general point that the rationality of one’s position depends on more than just the overall similarity of the contents of one’s beliefs to the contents of the beliefs of an enhanced agent.
the enhanced agent, because it would make the limited agent’s position self-undermining, unlike the position of the enhanced agent.

So we see that the motivating idea behind Deference also helps explain why Deference fails in certain cases, like the case of the non-skeptic. The motivating idea is that one’s position should be as similar as possible to the enhanced agent’s position. The problem is that Deference focuses on only one respect of similarity. Usually, this doesn’t matter, because becoming more similar in this respect doesn’t usually make one less similar in other respects. But occasionally, as in the case of the non-skeptic, it does. In such cases, Deference fails.

6. It is not rational to suspend judgment on external world skepticism

So far I have presented an argument, which I think would be accepted by the external world skeptic, for the claim that it is not rational to believe external world skepticism. It might seem to some readers that, after having shown this, not much argument is required to conclude that the skeptic should believe that skepticism is false. After all, consider the intellectual history of the skeptic. Prior to encountering the skeptical argument, she had a typical collection of ordinary beliefs, including the belief that she knew many things about the world. Then, upon hearing the skeptical argument, she was convinced by it, and gave up the belief that she had any external world knowledge. Once my argument has succeeded in convincing the skeptic that it is not rational to accept the skeptical argument, shouldn’t the skeptic simply revert back to the position she was in prior to encountering the argument? She now sees that accepting this argument was a mistake; it was not rational for her to do so. So, it may seem that the natural response is to re-adopt the position she would have maintained, had she not made that particular mistake.

I find this line of thought compelling. However, not everyone is convinced by it. Some think that at this point, rather than reverting to her original belief that she knows many things about the world, the former skeptic should now suspend judgment on skepticism. They think the skeptic should reason as follows: I’ve just seen that it’s not rational to accept the argument for external world skepticism, because doing so commits one to an irrational combination of beliefs. However, this doesn’t change the fact that the premises of the skeptical argument are highly compelling. They are so compelling that it couldn’t possibly be rational to believe that one of them is false, so it couldn’t be rational to believe that external world skepticism is false. The only remaining option is to suspend judgment on external world skepticism, so this is what I ought to do.

So, according to this line of thought, the skeptic should suspend judgment on skepticism while believing, on the basis of the argument just given, that she ought to suspend judgment on skepticism. I will call someone in this position a confident suspender. (Later on we will encounter an unconfident suspender, who suspends judgment on skepticism while suspending judgment on whether that is the attitude she ought to have.)

The position of the confident suspender may sound very reasonable. However, I will argue that this position is not rational—it has a defect very similar to the defect of the position of the external world skeptic.
First, note that suspending judgment on external world skepticism commits one to suspending judgment on other kinds of skepticism as well. In earlier sections of this chapter, I argued that if one accepts external world skepticism, one must also accept skepticism about the past and skepticism about complex reasoning. For parallel reasons, if one suspends judgment on skepticism about the external world, one should also suspend judgment on skepticism about the past and skepticism about complex reasoning. We will assume that the confident suspender does so.

Now, however, we can begin to see where the problem lies. The confident suspender believes a proposition P—the proposition that she ought to suspend judgment on external world skepticism—on the basis of the argument sketched a few paragraphs back. This argument is complex. (It relies on the claim that it’s not rational to believe external world skepticism, and the argument for this—the argument given in sections 1 through 4—is complex.) So the confident suspender believes P on the basis of a complex argument, while suspending judgment on skepticism about complex reasoning. That is, she believes P while suspending judgment about whether she ought to believe it. In doing so, she violates the following plausible principle of epistemic rationality:

**Belief Endorsement:** If one believes P, then if one takes any doxastic attitude toward the proposition that it is rational to believe P, one must believe it.

Belief Endorsement entails the Anti-Denouncement principle I appealed to in chapter two. As with Anti-Denouncement, we can bring out the plausibility of Belief Endorsement by thinking about a particular case in which one’s attitudes fail to conform to it.

Imagine, once again, that Bill is reflecting on future stock market returns. After looking at the entire history of the US stock market, he concludes that his evidence

---

45 The argument for this is as follows. Assume one suspends judgment on external world skepticism. Any reason one could have for believing skepticism about the past, or disbelieving it, would provide a parallel reason for believing or disbelieving skepticism about the external world. Since one neither disbelieves nor believes external world skepticism, one must not have any reason for believing or disbelieving skepticism about the past, and so must suspend judgment on it. I showed in sections 1 through 4 that it’s not rational to believe skepticism about complex reasoning, since the only plausible arguments for it are complex, and it’s self-undermining to believe skepticism about complex reasoning on the basis of a complex argument. Suppose one disbelieves skepticism about complex reasoning. In sections 1 through 4 I showed that if skepticism about the past is true, then skepticism about complex reasoning is true. Anyone who disbelieves skepticism about complex reasoning should infer from this conditional that skepticism about the past is false. But the agent we’re considering suspends judgment on skepticism about the past, and so this agent must not disbelieve skepticism about complex reasoning. She must suspend judgment on it.

46 The careful reader will notice that this doesn’t quite follow directly from the immediately preceding sentence. It follows only if the agent in question believes that she believes P on the basis of a complex argument. As someone who suspends judgment on skepticism about the past, she may not have this belief. However, even if she does not believe that she believes P on the basis of a complex argument, she does know that she doesn’t believe P on the basis of a simple argument. (If she did, she would have that argument in her head, and she does not.) The only other possibility is that she believes P for no reason whatsoever. But she can tell that P isn’t the kind of proposition that could rationally be believed for no reason whatsoever. So, she knows that either she believes P for no reason whatsoever, in which case her belief is irrational, or she believes P on the basis of a complex argument, in which case she suspends judgment on whether her belief in P is rational, thereby violating Belief Endorsement.
supports the claim that the market will return an average of at least 8% over the next couple of decades, and so he believes this claim. On the basis of this belief, he decides to invest almost all of his retirement savings in the market. So far, so good. Suppose, however, that he then learns of a period in Japanese history in which their stock market had a decades-long period of stagnation, which was preceded by economic conditions very much like the current economic conditions in the US. After learning this, he comes to suspend judgment on the proposition that his evidence supports the claim that the market will return at least 8%. “It’s just too complicated for me to figure out,” he thinks to himself; “I have no idea what my evidence supports.” Suppose though that, despite this change in his second-order beliefs, his first-order beliefs remain the same. He continues to believe that the market will return 8%, even though he suspends judgment on the claim that this belief is rational, and he continues to let his investment decisions be guided by this first-order belief. It seems clear that Bill’s position is now epistemically irrational. This is best explained by supposing that Belief Endorsement is true.

As noted above, the confident suspender has a combination of attitudes that don’t conform to Belief Endorsement. The confident suspender believes P—that one ought to suspend judgment on external world skepticism—while suspending judgment on whether she ought to believe P.

At this point it might seem that we must give up completely on idea that it could be rational to suspend judgment on external world skepticism. But there is one more possible position to consider—that of the unconfident suspender. Both the confident and the unconfident suspender suspend judgment on external world skepticism, and they both also suspend judgment on skepticism about the past and skepticism about complex reasoning. The confident suspender got into trouble by combining these attitudes with the belief that he ought to suspend judgment on external world skepticism. The unconfident suspender seeks to avoid this trouble by not believing this proposition. Instead, he suspends judgment on it.

Unfortunately the unconfident suspender thereby gets himself into a closely-related kind of trouble. He suspends judgment on external world skepticism while suspending judgment on whether he ought to suspend judgment on external world skepticism, thereby violating the following principle:

**Endorsement:** If one takes doxastic attitude D towards P, then, if one takes any doxastic attitude toward the proposition that it is rational to take D to P, one must believe it.

Endorsement is just a generalization of Belief Endorsement. Belief Endorsement says that rationality requires one to endorse one’s own beliefs, in the sense of believing them to be rational. But if this is true for belief, shouldn’t it be true for the other doxastic

---

47 In fact, there is a third possible position: one could suspend judgment on skepticism while believing that it is rational for one to do so, but *not* believe this on the basis of a complex argument. However, this position is not rational because the claim that one ought to suspend judgment on skepticism is not the kind of proposition that could be rationally believed on the basis of no argument at all. Moreover, I don’t think there are any plausible arguments for this proposition that are not complex.

48 The position of the unconfident suspender is the position that some scholars have taken to be the position of the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics. If this interpretation is right, then my argument here also serves as an argument against Pyrrhonian skepticism.
attitudes as well? In epistemology, as elsewhere, we should aim for simplicity and elegance in our theorizing. The simplest theory will treat all doxastic attitudes alike: since Endorsement is true for belief, then it is true for all other doxastic attitudes as well. If so, then the unconfident suspender fares no better than the confident suspender.

Although I find Endorsement very plausible, I know that some philosophers may find Belief Endorsement and Anti-Denouncement much more plausible than Endorsement. These philosophers may not agree with me that the unconfident suspender is irrational just in virtue of violating Endorsement. Before simply agreeing to disagree, I’d like to point out some other features of the unconfident suspender’s position. Even if one is unsure about whether Endorsement is true, one may agree with me that the unconfident suspender’s position is irrational in virtue of these other features.

First, note that the unconfident suspender originally adopted his position on the basis of complex considerations of the sort described above. (He did not adopt his position of radical uncertainty completely out of the blue; rather, it is only after seeing the way in which skepticism is self-underscoring that he adopted this position.) But, since he suspends judgment on propositions about the past, and because these considerations are complex, he knows nothing of them now. He knows that he is unsure of a great many things, but he doesn’t know why. This in itself plausibly makes his position irrational—having adopted his position, he can no longer see any good reason for maintaining it.

Additionally, I think this fact would tend to make his position unstable. Suppose the unconfident suspender happens to catch sight of one of his hands. He has a vivid experience as of there being a hand before him, and is extremely tempted to believe that he has a hand. It seems so obvious that there is a hand right before his very eyes! Not only is he tempted to believe that there is a hand, he does not, it would seem, have any good reason why he should not believe as he is tempted.

Now, of course, if a skeptic had this experience, she would have at the ready a compelling argument for why it is that one shouldn’t believe that one has a hand, namely her original argument for skepticism. And the confident suspender would have at the ready an argument for why one should suspend judgment on the proposition that one has a hand.

But the unconfident suspender, since he believes so little, has no doxastic resources with which to resist the temptation to believe that he has a hand. So it seems he would be motivated to adopt that belief. So his position is unstable. It tends to collapse into the position of disbelieving skepticism.

I have presented some reasons for thinking that it would not be rational to suspend judgment on external world skepticism. I think I have made a strong case for the claim that the confident suspender is irrational: his position violates the very plausible Belief Endorsement principle. I have made a less strong but, I think, still compelling case for the claim that the unconfident suspender is irrational.

49 The reader may reply here that although he has no *beliefs* that give him reason to avoid believing that he has a hand, he does have a doxastic attitude that would motivate him to suspend judgment—his attitude of suspending judgment about whether skepticism is true. If, for all you know, external world skepticism might be true, then it seems that you should not believe external world propositions. My response is that I don’t see why he would be motivated to maintain his attitude of suspending judgment on skepticism in light of his experience as of a hand. Unlike the confident suspender, he does not have an argument for the claim that he ought to suspend judgment.
7. **Epistemic dilemmas are impossible**

I have now argued that it is not rational to believe skepticism and that it is not rational to suspend judgment on skepticism. At this point I think it is plausible to conclude that we should believe that skepticism is false—after all, the only other two options are untenable.

However, this doesn’t quite follow from what I’ve shown so far. For all I’ve said, it could be that we’re caught in an epistemic dilemma: that all possible doxastic attitudes one could take towards skepticism are irrational. In this section I will argue that, in general, epistemic dilemmas are not possible.

The rough idea behind my argument is as follows. An epistemic dilemma is a situation in which, for every doxastic attitude \( D \), rationality requires that you not take \( D \) to \( P \). That is, rationality requires that you take no doxastic attitude at all towards \( P \). But it’s not metaphysically possible for you to do this; you’re bound to take some attitude or other towards \( P \). So, if there were an epistemic dilemma, there would be a situation in which rationality requires you to do the impossible. But, since ought implies can, there could be no such situation; so, there could not be an epistemic dilemma.

I’ll now state the key assumptions of the argument more precisely, show how together they yield my desired conclusion, and then provide defenses of them.

**Definition of Epistemic Dilemma:**

An epistemic dilemma is a situation in which, for some agent \( S \) and proposition \( P \), rationality requires that \( S \) not believe \( P \), and rationality requires that \( S \) not disbelieve \( P \), and rationality requires that \( S \) not suspend judgment on \( P \).

**Export for Rationality:**

For all doxastic attitudes \( D_1 \) and \( D_2 \) and propositions \( P_1 \) and \( P_2 \), if rationality requires that one take \( D_1 \) to \( P_1 \) and rationality requires that one take \( D_2 \) to \( P_2 \), then rationality requires that one take \( D_1 \) to \( P_1 \) and \( D_2 \) to \( P_2 \).

From these two assumptions it follows that an epistemic dilemma is a situation in which, for some agent \( S \) and proposition \( P \), rationality requires that \( S \) neither believe \( P \) nor disbelieve \( P \) nor suspend judgment on \( P \). However, it is not metaphysically possible for \( S \) to neither believe nor disbelieve nor suspend judgment on \( P \). \( ^{50} \) I now appeal to the following principle:

**Minimal Epistemic “Ought Implies Can”:**

---

\( ^{50} \) Some readers may want to resist at this point. Consider, for example, someone who is incapable of understanding a proposition \( P \), perhaps because he lacks the conceptual resources necessary to do so. He doesn’t believe \( P \) and he doesn’t disbelieve \( P \), either, but it sounds odd to say that he suspends judgment on \( P \). I’m happy to agree that this agent takes no doxastic attitude towards \( P \). However, it seems to me that rationality couldn’t possibly require that one take no doxastic attitude towards external world skepticism—rationality couldn’t possibly require that one be unable to understand the proposition expressed by external world skepticism. So, in the end, I think rationality does require that we take at least one doxastic attitude towards external world skepticism.
Epistemic rationality can require that one be in a certain state only if it is metaphysically possible for one to be in that state.

It follows that rationality could not require one to take no doxastic attitude towards a proposition, since it is not metaphysically possible for one to do so; so, epistemic dilemmas are impossible.

My argument relies crucially on Export for Rationality and the minimal epistemic “ought implies can” principle. These principles are very plausible, but some considerations might lead one to doubt them. I will now argue that we do not have any good reason to doubt these very plausible principles.

I’ll begin with Export for Rationality. It is easy to see the appeal of this principle. Think about a particular case: suppose rationality requires you to believe that God is omnipotent, and rationality requires you to believe that God is omnibenevolent. Does rationality require you to believe that God is omnipotent, and also to believe that God is omnibenevolent? The answer, it seems, must be yes. (Note that it doesn’t follow from export for rationality alone that rationality requires you to believe that God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. A multiple-premise closure principle would be required to yield that further result.)

Some might object to export for rationality by claiming that an analogous principle involving the moral “ought” is false:

**Export for Morality:**

For all actions A and B, if one ought to perform action A and one ought to perform action B, then one ought to perform action A and perform action B.\(^5\)

Export for morality is, I think, just as prima facie plausible as export for rationality. However, it is false if we accept a certain widely-held view about promising, according to which, whenever you promise that you will do something, then you ought to do it. Suppose you promise Anna that you will go to her birthday party, and you also promise Clara that you will not go to Anna’s birthday party. It follows from the view stated above that you ought to go to Anna’s birthday party and you ought to not go to Anna’s birthday party. However, it couldn’t possibly be the case that you ought to both go to Anna’s birthday party and not go to Anna’s birthday party (since this would violate “ought implies can”). If we accept this view on promising, then, export for morality is false. If so, says the objector, then this casts suspicion on export for rationality.

However, I don’t think this example shows that export for morality is false; rather, I think it shows that we need to reformulate our statement of the view about promising. I agree with the objector that morality couldn’t possibly require that one both go and not go to Anna’s birthday party. However, it is equally plausible to me that it couldn’t be the case that one ought to go Anna’s birthday party and that one ought not go to Anna’s birthday party. The problem, I think, arises at an earlier stage. It arises with our overly simplistic view on promising. We can revise this view as follows: if you

---

\(^5\) This principle is discussed in Williams and Atkinson (1965), where it is referred to as the agglomeration principle.
promise someone that you’ll perform action A, then you ought to do it, unless you have promised someone else that you will do something incompatible with performing action A. According to this version of the view, the fact that you have promised Clara that you’ll not go to Anna’s birthday party means that you are not morally required to go, even though you have promised Anna that you would.

One might object that this version of the view can’t be right, because it lets you get out of your obligation to keep your promises just by making contradictory promises. Suppose that, having promised to do something, you no longer feel like doing it; it seems that on this view, you can get out of your obligation to do it, and do nothing wrong, just by promising someone else not to do it. However, this problem vanishes if we elaborate the view by adding the following plausible principle: One ought not make contradictory promises.

I think this subtler view fits better with our ordinary thinking about promise-keeping. Suppose that, in the example above, you end up not going to Anna’s birthday party. When Anna finds out what happened, I think Anna would reproach you by saying something like, “Why did you promise Clara you wouldn’t attend my birthday party, after promising me that you would?” rather than by saying “Why, having promised to attend my birthday party and having promised Clara not to attend, did you then not come?” So I think that the most plausible view on promising is compatible with export for morality. Thus, we do not have a compelling reason to doubt export for rationality.

I’ll now discuss my epistemic “ought implies can” principle. There are many different versions of this principle, and some of them have been justly criticized by epistemologists. For example, versions of this principle involving psychological or nomological possibility don’t seem right. Epistemic rationality may require me to believe that plane flights are generally safe even if I am psychologically unable to do so. However, my preferred minimal version of epistemic “ought implies can” escapes objections of this sort. It is metaphysically possible to believe that plane flights are generally safe, even if it’s not psychologically possible, and so it is compatible with my version of the principle that rationality requires that one do so. So I think this version is sufficiently minimal to be highly plausible. A detailed and plausible defense of this principle can be found in Greco (unpublished ms).

This concludes my main argument for the claim that epistemic dilemmas are not possible. I’ll now go on to give an argument for a slightly different, but related claim: that no one could ever rationally believe that they are in an epistemic dilemma. If true, I think this provides some additional support for the idea that epistemic dilemmas aren’t possible.

In particular, I’ll show that it follows from the Endorsement principle discussed above that no one could ever rationally believe that they are in an epistemic dilemma. Consider a proposition P such that one might be in an epistemic dilemma with respect to P. Suppose first that the agent believes P. In that case, according to Belief Endorsement, the agent must believe that this belief is rational, and so the agent shouldn’t believe that she’s in an epistemic dilemma. Suppose, alternatively, that the agent believes that P is

---


53 The careful reader will note that this only follows from Belief Endorsement if we suppose that the agent takes some attitude or other towards the proposition that it’s rational for him to believe P. If the agent is so
false. Once again, it follows from Belief Endorsement that she must believe that this attitude is rational, in which case she’ll think she’s not in an epistemic dilemma. Finally, suppose she suspends judgment on P. It follows from Endorsement that she must believe that she should suspend judgment on P, which is, once again, incompatible with the belief that she is in an epistemic dilemma. So, we see that no matter which doxastic attitude the agent takes to P, Endorsement requires that the agent have a corresponding higher-order belief that is incompatible with the belief that she is in an epistemic dilemma with respect to P. 54

So, I conclude that it would never be rational to believe that one is in an epistemic dilemma, which further buttresses my claim that epistemic dilemmas are not possible.

8. Summary

To summarize, here is the structure of the argument picking up after Section 5:

1. It is not rational to believe that skepticism is false. (defended in Sections 1 – 4)
2. It is not rational to suspend judgment on skepticism. (defended in Section 6)
3. Therefore, if there’s any doxastic attitude one could rationally take towards skepticism, it is disbelief.
4. Epistemic dilemmas are not possible. (defended in Section 7)
5. Therefore, there must be at least one doxastic attitude that one could rationally take towards skepticism.
6. Therefore, rationality requires that one disbelieve skepticism, i.e. believe that skepticism is false.

9. Conclusion

I have argued, using only premises that even an external world skeptic would accept, that rationality requires us to believe that external world skepticism is false. This argument could be used to rationally persuade an external world skeptic to give up her skepticism.

In contrast, many contemporary epistemologists regard the skeptic as a hopeless case, and the attempt to reason with the skeptic as a lost cause. The skeptic is portrayed as someone so far gone, epistemologically speaking, that there’s no point in trying to save

54 One might object that I have failed to consider the fourth possibility, namely, that the agent takes no attitude at all towards P. If so, this is presumably because he is so conceptually impoverished that he cannot understand the proposition that he is in an epistemic dilemma. So it is true of this agent as well that he can’t rationally believe that he is in an epistemic dilemma, if only because he can’t have this belief at all. In short, my claim is that it will be true of all agents that either the agent is not capable of believing that he is in an epistemic dilemma, or that Endorsement requires that he adopt a second-order belief that entails that he is not in an epistemic dilemma. Since he can’t believe it, he can’t rationally believe it; so, my claim that no one could rationally believe that they are in an epistemic dilemma stands fast.
here now. The best we can do is to try to prevent others, who are not yet skeptics, from succumbing to the same fate. Thus Williamson’s observation that most responses to skepticism are “better at prevention than cure”\(^{55}\) and Byrne’s remark that “the sceptic doesn’t need an argument; she needs [psychological] treatment.”\(^{56}\)

The upshot of this chapter is that this view of the situation is misguided. As I have shown, we need not regard the skeptic as someone who can’t be reasoned with. Each premise of my argument should be accepted by an external world skeptic. Once the skeptic has accepted the conclusion of my argument—that rationality requires us to believe that skepticism is false—she should then adopt that belief. So, I claim, philosophical argument alone is quite capable of reasoning the skeptic out of skepticism.

\(^{55}\) Williamson (2000, 27)  
\(^{56}\) Byrne (2004, 301)
References:


Byrne, Alex (2004) “How Hard are the Sceptical Paradoxes?” *Nous* 38: 299 – 325


Christensen, David (forthcoming) “Rational Reflection,” *Philosophical Perspectives*


Greco, Daniel (unpublished ms) “The Impossibility of Skepticism”


Lewis, David (1973) *Counterfactuals* Harvard University Press


Lycan, William (1985) “Epistemic Value” *Synthese* 64 (2)


Russell, Bertrand (1921) *The Analysis of Mind* Public Domain


Weatherson, Brian (unpublished manuscript) “Do Judgments Screen Evidence?” available online at [http://brian.weatherson.org/JSE.pdf]


Williamson, Timothy (forthcoming) “Improbable Knowing” in *Evidentialism and its Discontents*, Oxford University Press