

*A Priori Skepticism**

James R. Beebe (University at Buffalo)

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In this article I investigate a neglected form of radical skepticism that questions whether any of our logical, mathematical and other seemingly self-evident beliefs count as knowledge. ‘*A priori* skepticism,’ as I will call it, challenges our ability to know any of the following sorts of propositions:

(1.1) The sum of two and three is five.

(1.2) Whatever is square is rectangular.

(1.3) Whatever is red is colored.

(1.4) No surface can be uniformly red and uniformly blue at the same time.

(1.5) If ‘if p then q ’ is true and ‘ p ’ is true, then ‘ q ’ is true.

(1.6) No statement can be both true and false at the same time and in the same respect.

(1.7) If A is taller than B , and B is taller than C , then A is taller than C .

(1.8) Everything is identical to itself.

(1.9) If the conclusion of an inductive argument is contingent, it is possible for the premises of that argument to be true and its conclusion to be false.

(1.10) George W. Bush could have been a plumber.

(1.11) George W. Bush could not have been a prime number.

(1.12) ‘ $2 + 3 = 5$ ’ is necessarily true.

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Call these statements ‘putatively *a priori* necessities’ (hereafter ‘PANs’). Not included in this list are *cogito* propositions, propositions about a subject’s own mental states, and contingent *a priori* propositions. *A priori* skepticism, as I develop it, does not challenge our ability to know any of these propositions.¹

Generally, when philosophers say they are “skeptical about the *a priori*,” they mean they are committed to a thoroughgoing empiricism that takes all knowledge to be *a posteriori*.² These so-called skeptics about the *a priori* agree for the most part with rationalists about which of our logical, mathematical and self-evident beliefs count as knowledge. They simply disagree about the nature of the warrant those beliefs enjoy. *A priori* skepticism, as I conceive it, is much more radical, questioning our ability to have any knowledge of PANs. (Since it is possible to have *a posteriori* knowledge of many PANs, *a priori* skepticism may need to be coupled with skepticism about the external world in order to raise a fully effective skeptical challenge.³)

Many philosophers believe that radical skeptical challenges to *a priori* knowledge of PANs cannot be raised in the same way that challenges to *a posteriori* knowledge of the external world can. For example, it is often alleged that part of the reason skeptics about the external world succeed in raising doubts about whether I know that I have hands is that it is possible that I do not have hands. However, since it is not possible for PANs to be false, it is argued that no analogous skeptical challenge to our knowledge of them can be raised. Relatedly, since any skeptical hypothesis that portrays us as being deceived into falsely believing that PANs are true would seem to be necessarily false, it can be difficult to see how an impossible skeptical hypothesis could ever present a serious skeptical threat. It is also widely held that any argument

¹ Thanks to A. P. Taylor for helping me clarify the intended scope of *a priori* skepticism.

² Cf., e.g., Philip Kitcher, “The Naturalists Return,” *Philosophical Review*, 101 (1992): 53-114, Hilary Kornblith, “The Impurity of Reason,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 81 (2000): 67-89, and Michael Devitt, “There Is No A Priori,” in Matthias Steup & Ernest Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 105-15.

³ Thanks to Marc Moffett for bringing this point to my attention.

for *a priori* skepticism will be self-defeating because such an argument must appeal to epistemic principles, possibilities and inferential relations that are commonly taken to be known *a priori*.

In this paper I endeavor to show that each of these alleged obstacles to the possibility of *a priori* skepticism can be overcome and that *a priori* skepticism can present a significant epistemological challenge. It is important to note that I will be considering only skepticism about our knowledge of PANs—not skepticism about our justification for believing that PANs are true. I must leave the difficult issues surrounding the latter type of skepticism to another occasion. I will also be concerned primarily with the question of whether *a priori* skeptical challenges can be raised, not with whether those challenges, once they are raised, can be answered. Since there appears to be considerable resistance to the idea that *a priori* skeptical challenges can even be raised, the former question would seem to demand prior consideration.

I begin in section I by laying out some basic considerations concerning skepticism about the external world that will serve as useful starting points for articulating the *a priori* skeptical challenge. In the following section I show that the necessary truth and *a priori* status of PANs do not prevent our beliefs in them from being vulnerable to skeptical attack. In section III I argue that *a priori* skeptics can use apparently impossible skeptical hypotheses to lodge effective skeptical challenges. In the final section I respond to various versions of the charge that *a priori* skepticism is self-defeating.

I.

The most commonly encountered form of skeptical argument is the following, where *O* is any proposition we ordinarily take ourselves to know and *SK* is an appropriately chosen skeptical hypothesis:

(2.1) If I know that *O*, then I know that not-*SK*.

(2.2) I don't know that not-*SK*.

(2.3) Therefore, I don't know that *O*.

The first premise is typically based upon a closure principle for knowledge such as the following:

(CP) If S knows that p and S knows that p entails q , then S knows (or is in a position to know) that q .

The second premise can be supported in a variety of ways. For example, the skeptic can note that one's belief that not- SK is insensitive (i.e., one would believe not- SK even if SK were true) or argue that the choice between O and SK is underdetermined.⁴ Skeptical arguments succeed in raising significant philosophical challenges by appealing to considerations such as these that non-skeptics find to be plausible but that seem to lead to unacceptable conclusions about human knowledge.

Most responses to skepticism fall into one of two roughly drawn categories. What I will call a 'rebutting response to skepticism' grants that a given type of skeptical challenge has been raised and attempts to show how the challenge can be met. An 'undercutting response to skepticism,' by contrast, attempts to show that the considerations that allegedly constitute a skeptical challenge do not in fact raise any significant challenge (perhaps despite initial appearances). A philosopher who provides a rebutting response to skepticism is analogous to a soldier who tries to destroy an enemy target. However, one who offers an undercutting response to skepticism is analogous to a soldier who seeks to show that—contrary to initial reports—there is in fact no enemy target at the location in question.

Not every response to skepticism falls neatly into one of these categories. Contextualist responses, for example, don't seem to count as either rebutting or undercutting responses, and the 'semantic' response to skepticism offered by Donald Davidson might be viewed as an instance of either.⁵ According to

⁴ The sensitivity requirement on knowledge was first articulated by Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1981). For details concerning underdetermination arguments for skepticism see Anthony Brueckner, "The Structure of the Skeptical Argument," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 54 (1994): 827-35, and Stewart Cohen, "Two Kinds of Skeptical Argument," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 58 (1998): 143-59.

⁵ Prominent contextualist responses include Stewart Cohen, "How to Be a Fallibilist," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2 (1988): 91-123; "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13 (1999): 57-89,

Davidson's theory of radical interpretation, one cannot correctly attribute massive doxastic error to another subject. This means that skeptical hypotheses embody an importantly mistaken assumption, since they hypothesize the existence of such massive error. Once we recognize that skeptical hypotheses are premised on a fundamental mistake, Davidson alleges, we should no longer view them as capable of presenting us with significant philosophical challenges. One might view Davidson's response as an argument that grants that the skeptic raises a significant skeptical challenge but that rebuts this challenge by showing that one of its key components is mistaken. Alternatively, one might take Davidson's argument to show why—contrary to initial appearances—a cogent philosophical challenge was never actually raised by the skeptic.⁶ Despite the presence of some difficult to classify cases, however, most responses to skepticism can be seen as either a rebutting or an undercutting response.

In fact, most responses to skepticism seem to count as rebutting responses. The basic Moorean reply, for instance, is a paradigmatic rebutting response. G. E. Moore wrote:

I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand,' and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another.'⁷

Keith DeRose "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (1992): 913-29; "Solving the Skeptical Problem," *Philosophical Review*, 104 (1995): 1-52, and David Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (1996): 549-67. Davidson's responses can be found in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in E. Lepore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 307-19; "Empirical Content," in E. Lepore (ibid.), pp. 320-32. On certain interpretations, Putnam's original discussion of brains in vats also counts as an undercutting response to skepticism (*Reason, Truth and History*, New York: Cambridge, 1981, ch. 1). For detailed discussion of this class of responses to skepticism cf. Brueckner, "Semantic Answers to Skepticism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 73 (1992): 200-19.

⁶ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify the issues here.

⁷ Moore, "Proof of an External World," *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 145-46.

Although Moore claimed that this reply was aimed only at the view that there are no material things and not at the view that nobody knows there are material things—and, hence, that his famous reply was not in fact a response to any type of skepticism—what has come to be known as the ‘Moorean’ reply to skepticism has the following form.⁸ One begins from the commonsense conviction that one has knowledge of a certain kind and argues on that basis to the conclusion that a given type of skepticism must be false.⁹

Although the Moorean reply is ordinarily deployed as a rebutting response to skepticism, consider the prospects of using it as an undercutting response. This would involve beginning from some “Moorean fact”—e.g., that I know that I have hands—and arguing on this basis that the external world skeptic has somehow failed to raise a legitimate philosophical challenge to our knowledge. It should be clear that the degree of plausibility of using the basic Moorean reply as an undercutting response is significantly lower than that of using the same reply as a rebutting response. This fact will be important in what follows because the most common reply I have encountered to *a priori* skepticism is a Moorean, undercutting response. As I will show, such a response is wholly ineffective.

II.

Skeptical hypotheses depict situations that are subjectively indistinguishable from what we take our normal circumstances to be but in which we fail to have knowledge. It is often said that skeptical hypotheses must describe logically possible scenarios in which our beliefs are false. In other words:

⁸ Moore, “A Reply to my Critics,” in P. A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, 3rd edn. (La Salle: Open Court), p. 669. Many philosophers have argued that the distinction Moore attempts to draw is not tenable (cf., e.g., Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 137).

⁹ Another important component of standard Moorean responses is the claim that it is more certain that we know some things about the external world than that all of the premises of any skeptical argument are true. Cf. Moore, “Four Forms of Scepticism,” *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959).

(SHI) In order for a skeptical hypothesis, *SK*, to raise a significant skeptical challenge to *S*'s putative knowledge that *O*, *SK* must be incompatible with *O*.

If (let us suppose) PANs are necessarily true, the truth of (SHI) implies that any skeptical hypothesis that attempts to challenge instances of putative *a priori* knowledge will be necessarily false. Since it is difficult to see how an impossible skeptical hypothesis could ever pose a serious threat, the truth of (SHI) could present a serious problem for *a priori* skepticism. Fortunately for the *a priori* skeptic, however, (SHI) is false. Moore vividly illustrates the fact that dreaming skeptical hypotheses need not be incompatible with what subjects believe with the following anecdote:

But, on the other hand, from the hypothesis that I am dreaming, it certainly would not follow that I am *not* standing up; for it is certainly logically possible that a man should be fast asleep and dreaming, while he is standing up and not lying down. It is therefore logically possible that I should both be standing up and at the same time dreaming that I am; just as the story, about a well-known Duke of Devonshire, that he once dreamt that he was speaking in the House of Lords and, when he woke up, found that he *was* speaking in the House of Lords, is certainly logically possible.¹⁰

Where *SK_i* is the hypothesis that the duke is both standing up and dreaming that he is standing up and *O_i* is the proposition that the duke is standing up, it is obvious that *SK_i* and *O_i* are not incompatible. However, it is widely agreed that in order for the duke to know that he is standing up, he must be in a position to know that he is not merely dreaming that he is standing. So, although dreaming that *p* may not be incompatible with *p*, it may be incompatible with knowing that *p* (for many instances of '*p*').¹¹

¹⁰ "Proof of an External World," p. 245.

¹¹ It is widely recognized that formulating the epistemic principle(s) upon which a dreaming skeptical argument can be based is a difficult matter, since the most obvious candidates entail the implausible KK-principle. For discussion, cf. E. Sosa, 'Skepticism and the Internal/External Divide', in J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Malden:

Consider now the following *a priori* skeptical hypothesis: A bumbling evil demon is intent upon deceiving his subjects about *a priori* matters. He notes (let us suppose) that there seems to be a distinct kind of phenomenology associated with intuitive experiences—i.e., experiences of certain *a priori* propositions intellectually seeming to be true.¹² Alvin Plantinga describes these experiences as follows:

[C]onsidering or entertaining *If all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal* feels different, somehow, from considering, say, *If all men are mortal and Lassie is mortal, then Lassie is a man*. The one belief seems right, compelling, acceptable; the other seems wrong, off-putting, and eminently rejectable; and this difference in experience is surely connected with our accepting the one and rejecting the other.¹³

Suppose the bumbling evil demon attempts to deceive his subjects by switching the two types of experiences Plantinga describes, making a consideration of affirming the consequent be accompanied by a feeling that it is “right, compelling, acceptable” and *modus ponens* seem “wrong, off-putting and eminently

Blackwell, 1999), pp. 145–57, at p. 145; B. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), ch. I; J. Vogel, ‘Skeptical Arguments’, *Philosophical Issues*, 14 (2004), pp. 426–55.

¹² By ‘intuitive experience’ I mean roughly what George Bealer (“The Origins of Modal Error,” *Dialectica*, 58 (2004): 12) means by ‘intuition’: “By intuitions we mean *seemings*: for you to have an intuition that p is just for it to *seem* to you that p. . . . For example, when you first consider one of de Morgan’s laws, often it neither seems true nor seems false; after a moment’s reflection, however, something happens: it now just seems true. This kind of seeming is *intellectual*, not experiential—sensory, introspective, imaginative. Intuition is different from belief: you can believe things that you do not intuit (e.g., that Fribourg is in Switzerland), and you can intuit things that you do not believe (e.g., the axioms of naive set theory). The experiential parallel is that you can believe things that do not appear (seem sensorily) to be so, and things can seem sensorily in ways you do not believe them to be (as with the Müller-Lyer arrows).”

¹³ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford, 1993), p. 104. I am not necessarily committed to there being the distinctive kind of phenomenology Plantinga describes. *A priori* skeptical arguments can be run in other ways, should the present one prove to be problematic. Cf., e.g., the *a priori* skeptical arguments in sec. III below.

rejectable.” Suppose, however, that because the evil demon is not very practiced in the art of deception, he mistakenly makes affirming the consequent seem wrong and *modus ponens* seem right. If his victims were to base their beliefs in the merits of *modus ponens* and affirming the consequent on the intellectual seemings provided to them by the evil demon, their beliefs would not count as knowledge, however true they might be. If we further suppose that the evil demon’s attempt to deceive his subjects about *a priori* matters is global and that his errors concerning the phenomenology of intuitive experiences are also uniformly global, we have the following situation: The intuitive experiences of subjects in the skeptical scenario are subjectively indistinguishable from those had by subjects in “normal” situations (where this means their intuitive experiences arise from a proper *a priori* grasp of the propositions in question). Yet subjects in the latter situation (let us suppose) have knowledge, whereas those in the former do not.

The following skeptical argument can be based upon this *a priori* skeptical hypothesis:

- (3.1) If I know that *modus ponens* is correct, then I know that my belief that *modus ponens* is correct is not based on faux intuitive experiences induced in me by a bumbling evil demon.
- (3.2) I don’t know that my belief that *modus ponens* is correct is not based on faux intuitive experiences induced in me by a bumbling evil demon.
- (3.3) Therefore, I don’t know that *modus ponens* is correct.

The *a priori* skeptic can note the strong parallel between this argument and the following, more common skeptical argument:

- (4.1) If I know that I am standing, then I know that I am not merely dreaming that I am standing.
- (4.2) I don’t know that I am not merely dreaming that I am standing.
- (4.3) Therefore, I don’t know that I am standing.

Each argument involves a situation that is not necessarily incompatible with the truth of the ordinary proposition in question but is incompatible with having knowledge of that proposition. In each case it seems I must be in a position to know the falsity of a skeptical hypothesis in order to know the ordinary

proposition. Furthermore, it can be difficult to see how I could know the falsity of the skeptical hypotheses, since if they were true my experiences would be exactly as they are. *A priori* skeptical challenges, then, need not employ skeptical hypotheses that are incompatible with what subjects ordinarily believe.

Reflection on the foregoing skeptical hypothesis also reveals that the following constraints are incorrect:

(SH2) In order for a skeptical hypothesis, *SK*, to raise a significant skeptical challenge to *S*'s putative knowledge that *O*, *S*'s putative knowledge must be *a posteriori*.

(SH3) In order for a skeptical hypothesis, *SK*, to raise a significant skeptical challenge to *S*'s putative knowledge that *O*, it must be logically or metaphysically possible for *O* to be false.

Although the beliefs of the subjects being deceived by the bumbling evil demon are *a priori* and necessarily true, they clearly seem vulnerable to skeptical attack. The falsity of (SH3) can be further supported by noting that whether an effective skeptical challenge can be raised to a theist's belief in God seems to have nothing to do with whether or not a necessarily existent divine being actually exists. Suppose for the sake of argument that God exists. A religious skeptic could nevertheless succeed in raising an epistemological challenge to belief in God by offering an epistemically undermining explanation of why theists believe in God. The explanation might appeal to the Freudian notion that religious belief is a manifestation of wish-fulfillment or to some evolutionarily adaptive but epistemically substandard belief-forming mechanism that is allegedly responsible for religious belief.¹⁴ Recognizing the incompatibility between knowing that God exists and believing in God on the basis of wish-fulfillment or some other epistemically erroneous basis, it

¹⁴ Cf. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. N. Norton, 1927/1961), and the various cognitive scientific explanations canvassed in Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006).

could be argued that if theists are to know that God exists, they must be in a position to know that these undermining explanations are false but that they cannot know such a thing. Imagine a theist responding by insisting that, since belief in God is necessarily true, no undermining explanation could ever raise an effective skeptical challenge to theistic belief. That would be absurd. Yet if the necessary truth of theistic belief cannot insulate it against skeptical attack, the necessary truth of PANs cannot prevent skeptical challenges to our knowledge of them from being raised either.

III.

The bumbling evil demon hypothesis takes aim at beliefs that are necessarily true, but it does so via a skeptical scenario that is both logically and metaphysically possible. It seems clearly possible that each of our *a priori* beliefs should be based upon intuitive experiences like the ones described and yet for these experiences to be produced by a bumbling evil demon. The question I now want to raise is whether effective skeptical challenges can be raised using scenarios that are impossible. I will argue that they can be.

Practically all of the skeptical hypotheses encountered in the literature satisfy the following constraint:

- (SH4) In order for a skeptical hypothesis, *SK*, to raise a significant skeptical challenge to *S*'s putative knowledge that *O*, it must be logically or metaphysically possible for *SK* to be true.

Although it can be difficult to see how a genuinely impossible skeptical hypothesis could ever pose a serious skeptical threat, Descartes nonetheless believed that it was possible. For example, in the first *Meditation* he considers the possibility that an all-powerful being might be deceiving him about basic *a priori* matters:

What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable?¹⁵

In the *Third Meditation* Descartes reflects upon the possibility that “some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident”:

I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see clearly with my mind’s eye.¹⁶

Descartes takes the force of this skeptical threat to be intensified when he considers that his origins and nature might be the result of mere chance rather than the handiwork of a perfect, omnipotent God:

According to their supposition, then, I have arrived at my present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events, or by some other means; yet since deception and error seem to be imperfections, the less powerful they make my original cause, the more likely it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time.¹⁷

Descartes’ skeptical hypothesis attempts to cast doubt upon our ability to know PANs by describing a situation in which we have intuitive experiences that are subjectively indistinguishable from the ones we have in actuality and yet the *a priori* propositions we believe on their basis are false.

An analogous *a priori* skeptical hypothesis is suggested by Wittgenstein’s reflections on logical necessity, at least as those reflections have been interpreted by Barry Stroud.¹⁸ According to Stroud, Wittgenstein tries to steer a middle course between: (i) full-blooded conventionalism, which takes the

¹⁵ *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁸ “Wittgenstein and Logical Necessity,” *The Philosophical Review*, 74 (1965): 504-18.

necessity of any statement to consist in our having expressly decided to treat that statement as unassailable, and (ii) a Platonic realism, which locates the source of logical necessity in mind-independent facts. In Stroud's opinion, Wittgenstein agrees with realists that we can have no clear understanding of what it would mean for the apparently necessary truths of mathematics and logic to be false. Yet Wittgenstein also agrees with conventionalists that our ways of inferring, counting, calculating and so on are not the only possible ones. Indeed, Wittgenstein suggests that the following mathematical practices might represent genuine alternatives to our own:

(5.1) Following the rule "+ 2" by constructing the series "2, 4, 6, ..., 996, 998, 1000, 1004, 1008,"

(5.2) Agreeing that *modus ponens* is deductively valid, yet failing to agree that q follows from p and if p then q .

(5.3) Measuring with rulers that expand to an extraordinary extent when slightly heated.

(5.4) Dividing by $(n-n)$ and not being bothered by the results.

(5.5) Selling wood according to the area covered by a pile of wood.

(5.6) Selling wood at a price equal to the labor of felling the timber, measured by the age and strength of the woodsman.

Wittgenstein denies that we can know that the reason such alternatives are unimaginable to us is that they lead to logical contradictions. They may not be real possibilities for creatures like us and they may not be fully intelligible to us, but Wittgenstein wants to insist that they are nonetheless possibilities in some sense.

Describing his reflections on our mathematical practices, Wittgenstein writes:

What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of man; not curiosities however, but rather observations on facts which no one has doubted, and which have only gone unremarked because they are always before our eyes.¹⁹

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). But: if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize—then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him.²⁰

Thus, Wittgenstein believes that if the “natural history” of our species had gone differently, we might have had different concepts and found different things to be conceivable, inconceivable or natural. Stroud writes:

It is in that sense a contingent fact that calculating, inferring, and so forth, are carried out in the ways that they are—just as it is a contingent fact that there is such a thing as calculating or inferring at all. But we can understand and acknowledge the contingency of this fact, and hence the possibility of different ways of calculating, and so forth, without understanding what those different ways might have been.²¹

Instead of asking readers to imagine what it would be like for our basic logical and mathematical beliefs to be false—something that he grants we may not be able to do—Wittgenstein directs his readers to the epistemically possible contingency of their logical and mathematical intuitions. In other words,

¹⁹ *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees & G. E. M. Anscombe (eds.), trans. by Anscombe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), I, §141.

²⁰ *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edn., trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), IIxii.

²¹ “Wittgenstein and Logical Necessity,” p. 513.

Wittgenstein asks his readers to consider the broadly epistemic possibility that creatures like us have the intuitions we do about what constitutes correct calculating, reasoning or measuring only because of the contingent path the “natural history” of our species has taken and that, because of this contingency, those intuitions might have no essential connection to the facts (if any) about what correct calculating, reasoning and measuring consist in.²² The *a priori* skeptic can challenge us to show how we know that this epistemic possibility does not represent our actual situation. Since there is an incompatibility between my having genuine knowledge of necessary truths and the obtaining of the epistemic possibility described above, it seems I must be in a position to rule out this possibility if I am to have any knowledge of logical or mathematical truths. One cannot claim in response that it is absurd to suggest that our current ways of calculating, reasoning or measuring might be massively mistaken, since this would be an appeal to the very body of putative knowledge that the *a priori* skeptic seeks to call into question. Wittgenstein’s account of logical necessity can thus be co-opted to serve as a skeptical hypothesis, even though it was not intended to serve as one.

Descartes and Wittgenstein, then, each describe scenarios in which mental episodes of seeming to see that PANs are true do not reliably indicate their truth. Like skeptical hypotheses about the external world, these *a priori* skeptical hypotheses show how it is possible for certain classes of appearances to fail to reflect reality. Let a ‘DW’ be any subject whose *a priori* beliefs are massively and constantly in error due to the sorts of circumstances described by Descartes or Wittgenstein. The following skeptical argument can be constructed on the basis of the foregoing hypotheses:

(6.1) If I know that $2 + 3 = 5$, then I know that I am not a DW.

(6.2) I don’t know that I am not a DW.

²² Cf. James R. Beebe, “Constraints on Skeptical Hypotheses,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 60, (2010): 449-470, for detailed discussion of the sense in which skeptical hypotheses must be possible in order to pose significant philosophical challenges.

(6.3) Therefore, I don't know that $2 + 3 = 5$.

Since, if I were a DW, my intuitive evidence would be exactly what it is now, it seems that no appeal to that evidence could suffice to show that I live in a normal world (i.e., a world where I really do grasp PANs *a priori*) rather than a DW world. A skeptic could support (6.2) by arguing that my belief that I am not a DW is insensitive (i.e., I would falsely believe I wasn't a DW, even if I were²³) or by arguing that my intuitive experiences underdetermine the choice between my *a priori* beliefs and the competing skeptical hypothesis. And of course, the argument generalizes. We can substitute any PAN for ' $2 + 3 = 5$ ' and reach the conclusion that we fail to know any of the most basic truths of logic or mathematics.

Many philosophers will no doubt be skeptical about the possibility of using impossible skeptical hypotheses to raise skeptical challenges. After all, they are impossible. Consider, by way of response, the naïve attempt to offer an inductive solution to the problem of induction and note that such a solution counts as a *rebutting* response to inductive skepticism. The inductive solution grants that a significant challenge to our reliance upon induction has been raised and seeks to show how the challenge can be met. As hopeless and implausible as this reply may be, it is even more implausible to suppose that such a reply could ever show that there is no genuine problem of induction after all. In other words, the idea of offering an inductive, *undercutting* response to inductive skepticism seems to lie far beyond the realm of plausibility.

²³ Like an increasing number of philosophers, I do not think that subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents (i.e., counterpossibles) are vacuously true. Cf. Edwin D. Mares, "Who's Afraid of Impossible Worlds?," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 38 (1997): 516-26, Daniel Nolan, "Impossible Worlds: A Modest Approach," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 38 (1997): 535-72, David Vander Laan, "Counterpossibles and Similarity," in Frank Jackson & Graham Priest (eds.), *Lewisian Themes: The Philosophy of David K. Lewis* (Oxford: Oxford, 2004), pp. 258-75, and Berit Brogaard & Joe Salerno, "Why Counterpossibles are Non-Trivial," *The Reasoner*, 1 (2007): 5-6.

Note, however, that to argue that the impossibility of Descartes' and Wittgenstein's *a priori* skeptical hypotheses render them incapable of raising significant skeptical challenges is to argue in precisely the same fashion. The belief that these hypotheses are impossible is an *a priori* belief—i.e., the very sort of belief that *a priori* skepticism seeks to call into question. If one cannot appeal to inductive evidence to keep the problem of induction from arising or appeal to testimonial evidence to keep the problem of other minds from arising, then one cannot appeal to one's *a priori* beliefs to show that *a priori* skeptical challenges cannot be raised. Consequently, skeptics about the possibility of *a priori* skepticism who appeal to their *a priori* beliefs to argue that *a priori* skepticism is impossible either beg the question or otherwise fail to engage with the skeptical challenge that is being raised.²⁴

IV.

Consider the following generalization of the argument from (6.1) to (6.3):

(7.1) For any PAN, if I know that the PAN is true, then I know that I am not a DW.

(7.2) I don't know that I am not a DW.

(7.3) Therefore, for any PAN, I don't know that the PAN is true.

If (7.3) is true, I cannot know (7.1) or (7.2) to be true, since they are PANs. Therefore, if the argument is sound, it cannot be known to be sound. The skeptical predicament is only worsened when we consider that the proposition that the argument from (7.1) to (7.3) is valid is itself a PAN. Since *a priori* skeptical hypotheses, as I conceive of them, can be used to challenge our ability to know that an argument is valid—including valid arguments that call into question our ability to know that an argument is valid—the soundness of the argument doubly implies the unknowability of its soundness.

²⁴ Furthermore, we can note that if Moore's earnest insistence that he has hands fails to constitute an adequate rebutting response to external world skepticism, the mere insistence that one is right about *a priori* matters should also fail as a rebutting response to *a priori* skepticism.

Does all of this unknowability mean that *a priori* skepticism is self-defeating? Many philosophers think so. Matthias Steup, for example, writes:

It is generally agreed that PAPs [viz., ‘putative *a priori* propositions’] are knowable. There is skepticism about knowledge of the external world, other minds, and the past. Skepticism about PAPs, however, is rarely pursued. Indeed, considering that knowledge of PAPs includes knowledge of the laws of logic, and more specifically, knowledge of an argument’s validity, it is hard to see how a skeptical argument for anything could get off the ground without the prior assumption that knowledge of PAPs is indeed possible.²⁵

Consider the following requirement suggested by Steup’s remarks:

(8.1) Anyone who puts forward an argument must assume that it is possible to know that the premises of the argument support the conclusion.

Even if arguers were required to assume that they actually have knowledge of the fact that their premises support their conclusions, *a priori* skeptics could satisfy the requirement by casting their arguments as *reductios*. Beginning from the assumption that we know certain arguments or argument forms to be valid, the *a priori* skeptic can offer arguments that seem to show that we don’t have any such knowledge, thereby deriving a contradiction.

Perhaps, however, it is not any prior assumption about the possibility of the *a priori* skeptic knowing that the premises of his argument support his conclusion that is thought to generate problems for *a priori* skeptical arguments so much as the fact that conclusions of *a priori* skeptical arguments like (7.3) imply that we cannot know the arguments are valid. Consider, then, the following notion of self-defeat:

(8.2) An argument is self-defeating if the truth of its conclusion implies that one has no knowledge of the fact that its premises support the conclusion.

²⁵ “Knowledge and Skepticism: Introduction,” pp. 10-11.

Richard Fumerton suggests that an argument can also be self-defeating if its conclusion undermines the epistemic status of its premises:

(8.3) An argument is self-defeating if the truth of its conclusion implies that one has no justification for accepting its premises.²⁶

Since we are examining skepticism about *knowledge* of PANs rather than skepticism about *justification* for believing PANs, we should consider the following, knowledge-based variant of (8.3):

(8.4) An argument is self-defeating if the truth of its conclusion implies that one has no knowledge of its premises.

The requirements imposed by (8.2) and (8.4), however, are implausibly strong.

(8.4) is too strong for reasons similar to those offered against (SH3). Suppose that *p* and *q* entail not-*r* and that *S* uses *p* and *q* as premises in an argument against *r*. (8.4) implies that any attempt to use *p* and *q* (or any other contrary considerations) to argue against *r* will be self-defeating, if *r* is a necessary truth. On the traditional view that most philosophical theses are necessarily true, if true at all, (8.4) implies that no non-self-defeating argument can ever be constructed to challenge substance dualism, epistemic internalism, rule-utilitarianism, Platonism about universals or four-dimensionalism, should any of these views turn out to be true. (8.4) thus severely and unwarrantedly restricts the range of legitimate philosophical dispute.

Furthermore, suppose that *S* is epistemically justified in believing both (i) that the premises of her argument, *p* and *q*, are true and (ii) that *p* and *q* support her conclusion. Suppose, however, that *S*'s conclusion implies that she can neither know that her premises are true nor know that they support her conclusion. (Note that the first supposition concerns *justification*, while the second concerns *knowledge*. It will be important to keep this distinction in mind in what follows.) According to (8.2) and (8.4), *S*'s

²⁶ *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), p. 44.

argument will be doubly self-defeating. However, since the unknowability of (i) and (ii) does not undermine the justification S has for believing (i) and (ii), (8.2) and (8.4) have the following, implausible consequences:

(9.1) Even though nothing defeats the justification S has for believing that p and q are true, S 's employment of p and q as premises in the argument is self-defeating.

(9.2) Even though nothing defeats the justification S has for believing that p and q provide support for her conclusion, S 's offering p and q as support for her conclusion is self-defeating.

(9.1) and (9.2) sound very nearly contradictory. If S 's justification is not defeated by whatever features of her argument supposedly engender self-defeat, then what is defeated? S 's conclusion "defeats" the possibility of her knowing (i) and (ii), but there does not seem to be a non-question-begging reason why that should be thought to render her argument completely ineffective. Labeling an argument 'self-defeating' simply because it has skeptical implications would beg the question against the skeptic. Furthermore, to call an argument 'self-defeating' is to imply that it has undermined its own ability to function as a means of rational persuasion. However, since S 's argument does not undermine the justification S has for believing that her premises are true or for believing that the premises support her conclusion, the skeptical implications of the argument do not seem to prevent S from being justified in believing that the conclusion is true. While the truth of *a priori* skepticism would certainly be an unwelcome result, that does not mean we are free to stipulate that any argument in support of it counts as a self-undermining failure.

Ordinarily, when we put forward philosophical arguments, we want to be able to know that our premises are true and that they support our conclusions. If the conclusion of an argument undermines our ability to know the premises, one of these common epistemic goals will be thwarted. However, in the case of skeptical arguments, showing that we lack knowledge of a certain kind is the central goal. Thus, if it

turns out that a skeptical argument shows that we cannot even have knowledge of the premises of that argument, that may be no objection to the argument. If leading us by a plausible train of reasoning to a point where it appears that we cannot have knowledge of the premises we started with was part of the very goal of the skeptical argument, our resulting inability to know them is a sign the argument has succeeded—not a sign that it has failed. Thus, a better way to understand the sense in which an argument has defeated or undermined itself is to ask whether it has thwarted the dialectical goals it was intended to achieve. Note, however, that the goal of the *a priori* skeptical argument from (7.1) to (7.3) is to show that we lack knowledge of PANs—including PANs like (7.1) and (7.2). To claim that this argument undermines itself on the grounds that its conclusion implies the unknowability of its premises is to criticize the argument for accomplishing what it set out to accomplish—an undoubtedly ironic charge.

Think for a moment about how skeptical challenges to our knowledge of the external world are commonly viewed. Due primarily to the work of Stewart Cohen, Keith DeRose and Crispin Wright, epistemologists now widely agree that radical skepticism is best viewed as presenting us with a paradox. We non-skeptics find a jointly inconsistent set of claims to be individually plausible.²⁷ The standard form of the skeptical paradox is the following:

(2.1) If I know that *O*, then I know that not-*SK*.

(2.2) I don't know that not-*SK*.

not-(2.3) I know that *O*.

As noted above, the first component of the paradox is typically supported by reflection on epistemic principles such as closure and the second by insensitivity, underdetermination and related considerations.

²⁷ Cohen, "How to Be a Fallibilist," DeRose, "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions"; "Solving the Skeptical Problem," Wright, "Facts and Certainty," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 71 (1985): 429-72; "Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon," *Mind*, 100 (1991): 87-116.

The third is simply derived from common sense. The basic version of the *a priori* skeptical paradox is given by (6.1), (6.2) and the negation of (6.3).

One advantage of formulating skeptical challenges as paradoxes is that it makes clear that skeptical challenges can arise from things that sufficiently open-minded non-skeptics find to be plausible upon reflection. More traditional views of skeptical challenges take them to consist primarily in arguments put forward by skeptics. This encourages the view that in order to “win” the dialectical contest with the skeptic, the anti-skeptic merely needs to find a way to block the skeptic’s argument—e.g., by throwing a wrench of some sort into the skeptic’s argument. Wright, however, suggests the following picture:

[T]he premises of an interesting sceptical argument—one there is no living with—do not stand in need of justification; it is enough that we lack any justification for the denial that they are all true.²⁸

If a skeptical argument can succeed in showing that by our own lights we lack such a justification, that will be a sufficiently skeptical result.

The traditional view also fails to explain why centuries of non-skeptical epistemologists have taken the challenge of radical skepticism quite seriously, often going to great lengths to construct threatening skeptical arguments when there have in fact been relatively few genuine skeptics around. Laurence Bonjour once remarked, “if skeptics did not exist, one might reasonably say, the serious epistemologist would have to invent them.”²⁹ On the view I have sketched, however, it is not even necessary to invent them. It is enough that non-skeptics find the components of skeptical paradoxes to be sufficiently plausible. Wright remarks:

²⁸ “Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon,” pp. 89-90.

²⁹ *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1985), p. 15.

But if you yourself are led, in camera, as it were to that absurd conclusion by a seemingly well-motivated route, it is not intellectual comfort to reflect that the position is self-defeating; on the contrary, that simply intensifies the embarrassment.³⁰

Thus, if the considerations that lead non-skeptics to be presented with an *a priori* skeptical paradox are ones the non-skeptics find to be highly plausible, it is no consolation to be told that *a priori* skeptics cannot simultaneously know that *a priori* skepticism is true and that their *a priori* skeptical arguments are valid.³¹ Non-skeptics can recognize that by their own lights the mere insistence that we have knowledge of PANs fails to constitute an adequate undercutting response to *a priori* skepticism. The charge that *a priori* skepticism is self-defeating thus seems to stem to a large extent from a failure to appreciate that skeptical paradoxes can arise from things that non-skeptics find to be plausible.

Finally, I should perhaps mention that George Bealer has marshaled several arguments in support of the conclusion that the empiricist rejection of *a priori* intuition leads to self-defeat.³² Bealer's arguments, however, fail to show that *a priori* skeptical challenges cannot be raised because they focus solely on the coherence of simultaneously rejecting *a priori* intuition and continuing to engage in a certain kind of philosophical activity. In contrast to the view Bealer is attacking, *a priori* skepticism is simply the claim that we have no knowledge of PANs. At no point does it advise us to reject belief in PANs or to reject *a priori* intuition as a source of belief. Consider the fact that when Hume first articulated the problem of induction, he did not counsel us to stop forming inductive beliefs. He simply argued that such beliefs would not be epistemically justified. Hume granted that there might even be overriding practical

³⁰ "Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon," p. 89.

³¹ Note that it is in general impossible to know all of the propositions that constitute a paradox for the simple reason that the components of paradoxes are incompatible. Consequently, the joint unknowability of the components of the *a priori* skeptical paradox should not prevent them from constituting a genuine paradox.

³² "The Incoherence of Empiricism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Suppl.*, 66 (1992): 99-138.

motivations for continuing to form inductive beliefs, but these considerations would not give them any distinctively epistemic justification. The *a priori* skeptic argues in a similar fashion. You can form all of the *a priori* beliefs you want. In fact, as far as *a priori* skepticism is concerned, you might even have a good deal of *a priori* justification for these beliefs. But that doesn't mean you have any *a priori* knowledge. Since *a priori* skepticism does not entail the rejection of *a priori* intuition as a source of belief, it fails to count as the type of position Bealer's self-defeat arguments seek to undermine. I conclude that *a priori* skepticism does not succumb to many of the charges of self-defeat that might be leveled against it.

V.

Although *a priori* skepticism has been almost completely neglected by the epistemological community, careful scrutiny reveals that it presents a formidable epistemological challenge. The foregoing considerations show that one cannot argue that *a priori* skeptical challenges cannot arise on the grounds that (i) PANs are necessarily true, (ii) our beliefs in PANs are *a priori*, (iii) some *a priori* skeptical hypotheses are necessarily false, or (iv) *a priori* skepticism is self-defeating. The question as to which rebutting response(s) to *a priori* skeptical challenges should be offered is one I must leave to another occasion.