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REASONING ONE'S WAY BACK INTO SKEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT: Susanna Rinard aims to show that it is possible to rationally persuade an external world skeptic to reject external world skepticism. She offers an argument meant to convince a skeptic who accepts her views on “several orthogonal issues in epistemology” to give up their external world skepticism. While I agree with Rinard that it is possible to reason with a skeptic, I argue that Rinard overlooks a variety of good epistemic grounds a skeptic could appeal to in rejecting her argument and its conclusion. More specifically, I argue that the external world skeptic can resist Rinard’s conclusion by (1) distinguishing between skepticism about knowledge and skepticism about justification, (2) by prioritizing obtaining accurate beliefs (maximizing true beliefs and minimizing false beliefs) over being rational, or (3) by treating suspension of judgment as the default rational doxastic attitude.

In her paper “Reasoning one’s Way out of Skepticism,” Susanna Rinard rejects the view that it is impossible to rationally persuade an external world skeptic that we have knowledge of the external world.¹ She does so by offering an argument that she claims “should be rationally persuasive to a skeptic” who agrees with her position “on several orthogonal issues in epistemology,” such as her views that complex reasoning relies on memory and that doxastic dilemmas are not possible.²

Like Rinard, I reject the view that it is impossible to rationally persuade an external world skeptic that we have knowledge of the external world. I think it is possible for the non-skeptic to reason with the skeptic and vice versa. Furthermore, I think that reasoned engagement between skeptics and non-skeptics can be good for both skeptics and non-skeptics alike. Rinard’s paper is a good example of this. I think the arguments in her paper might rationally convince a skeptic with a certain set of assumptions and values to give up their external world skepticism.

Still, I think Rinard overlooks a variety of good epistemic grounds a skeptic could appeal to in rejecting her argument and its conclusion. As a result, I think her claim that her argument should be rationally persuasive to a skeptic who agrees with her on the orthogonal issues in epistemology she identifies is much too strong.

My goal here is to discuss three routes not dealt with by Rinard via which the skeptic can resist Rinard’s arguments and their conclusion on epistemically respectable grounds. These three routes are the following:

¹ Rinard 2018, 240.

² Rinard 2018, 241.

- (1) The skeptic can hold that, while we lack *knowledge* of the external world, we can still be *justified* in believing things about the external world.
- (2) The skeptic can reject the view that we should aim to be rational under circumstances where we lack reason to think that being rational helps us form accurate doxastic attitudes.
- (3) The skeptic can argue that there are good epistemic grounds to treat suspension of judgment as the default rational doxastic position.³

Each of these three routes provides independent grounds for rejecting Rinard's argument. Thus, an external world skeptic need not take all three routes in order to have good epistemic grounds for rejecting Rinard's arguments and conclusions. Taking any one of these routes will do, because each route leads to the rejection of a necessary step in Rinard's argument. A skeptic who takes more than one route therefore has more than one independent reason for rejecting Rinard's argument against external world skepticism.

Given these additional epistemically respectable methods for rejecting Rinard's argument, I disagree with Rinard over how persuasive her argument against the skeptic is. Still, my response is friendly to her larger goal. This is because my response aims to continue and extend the project of encouraging productive reasoning between skeptics and non-skeptics. Each of the three routes I identify for the skeptic to use in response to Rinard creates an opportunity for additional philosophical reasoning and discussion between skeptics and non-skeptics about external world skepticism. I summarize Rinard's argument in the next section. I then discuss the additional routes by which I argue the external world skeptic could reject Rinard's conclusions in the three sections that follow.

I. Rinard's Argument

In brief, the first part of Rinard's argument is that accepting external world skepticism rationally requires accepting skepticism about the past, which in turn rationally requires accepting skepticism about complex reasoning, which in turn rationally undermines one's grounds for accepting external world skepticism in the first place. This first part of the argument aims to show that *believing* or *accepting* external world skepticism is rationally self-undermining.⁴

³ While I focus on these three grounds, I think there are additional epistemically respectable grounds that neither I nor Rinard address that a skeptic could use to resist her arguments and conclusions. Some of these additional grounds are pointed out in footnotes throughout the paper. Discussion of such additional grounds would provide a valuable extension of the conversation Rinard started and which I aim to contribute to here.

⁴ Rinard doesn't explicitly define external world skepticism, but various claims that she makes suggest that she is treating external world skepticism as the thesis that we don't have knowledge of the external world (or perhaps that it is not possible for us to have knowledge of the external world). For example, she writes that "Once one has accepted the argument for

Rinard begins her argument by offering what she takes to be an ecumenical reconstruction of the external world skeptic's argument. Rinard frames her paper as an attempt to show that one can "rationally persuade an external world skeptic that we have knowledge of the external world."⁵ However, her reconstruction of the skeptic's argument appeals not only to knowledge of the external world, but also to justification. Where "Normal" refers to a situation in which the external world is largely as it seems and "BIV" refers to a situation in which you are a brain-in-a-vat with experiences that create false impressions about the nature of your external world, the reconstructed skeptical argument goes like this:

- (1) One's basic evidence about the external world is restricted to propositions about the way the external world appears.
- (2) Propositions about the way the external world appears are evidentially neutral between Normal and BIV.
- (3) Neither Normal nor BIV is intrinsically more worthy of belief, independently of one's evidence.

Sub-conclusion from (1) – (3): one neither knows, nor is justified in believing, that BIV is false.

- (4) If one neither knows nor is justified in believing Q, and one knows that P entails Q, then one neither knows nor is justified in believing P.⁶
- (5) Therefore, for many external world propositions P, one neither knows nor is justified in believing P.⁷

Note that the sub-conclusion states that one neither knows *nor is justified in believing* that BIV is false, which in turn is used to generate the conclusion that one neither knows nor is justified in believing many propositions about the external world.

Rinard needs to include the "nor is justified in believing" part of her claim in order for the next two steps of her argument to work as intended. Her next step is to show that there is a parallel

external world skepticism, could any line of reasoning persuade them that knowledge of the external world is possible after all?" and "I think it *is* possible to rationally persuade an external world skeptic that we have knowledge of the external world" (2018, 240). Thus, Rinard treats 'external world skepticism' as the name of a thesis that we can ascribe truth-conditions to.

⁵ Rinard 2018, 240. Rinard discusses various ways in which one might reject some of these premises, but for the sake of focusing on novel challenges to Rinard's argument, I will not object to the argument on any of those grounds.

⁶ Rinard identifies premise 4 as a statement of "the closure principle." Thus, another way by which an external world skeptic could reject Rinard's argument and its conclusion is to reject the closure principle. Rinard points out in a footnote that while most epistemologists accept the closure principle, not all do (Rinard 2018, 244). For a useful overview of epistemic closure and the closure principle, see Luper 2020.

⁷ Rinard 2018, 243-44.

argument for skepticism about the past which looks like this, where “BIV(NoPast)” refers to the view that you are a brain-in-a-vat who just came into existence with false memories:

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

(2*) Propositions about the way the past appears are evidentially neutral between Normal and BIV(NoPast).

(3*) Neither Normal nor BIV(NoPast) 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 neither knows nor is justified in believing P.

(5*) Therefore, for many propositions P about the past, one neither knows nor is justified in believing P.⁸

Rinard’s key move is to convince the skeptic that if they believe they lack knowledge or justified beliefs about the external world, then they must rationally conclude that they also lack knowledge or justified beliefs about the past because the two arguments are the same in all relevant respects. Crucially, in the third step of Rinard’s argument it is lacking any knowledge or justification for beliefs about the past that undermines one’s ability to trust complex reasoning, which in turn undermines the grounds for accepting external world skepticism in the first place. This is because accepting conclusions generated by complex reasoning requires trusting one’s memory about having properly conducted the earlier steps in the argument, and Rinard argues that the skeptic’s argument for external world skepticism relies on complex reasoning. But Rinard argues that if one accepts skepticism about the past, then they cannot rationally so trust their own memory.⁹

If Rinard’s argument had only been about knowledge, the skeptic would not be self-undermined in their skepticism. This is because the skeptic could claim that, even without knowledge, they remain *justified* in trusting their memories, in retaining beliefs about the past, and, as a result, remain justified in relying on the complex reasoning needed to comprehend the argument for external world skepticism. But Rinard thinks that once someone believes that they have neither knowledge nor justification for believing in the external world or any apparent memories about the past, then they fail to be rational if they accept the conclusion of an argument that requires complex reasoning.

⁸ Rinard 2018, 244-45.

⁹ Rinard 2018, 245-50.

Rinard aims to show more than that the skeptic fails to be rational if they *accept* external world skepticism. Later, Rinard argues that *any* position other than rejection of external world skepticism is rationally self-undermining, and that as a result one should *reject* (i.e. disbelieve) external world skepticism.

Rinard makes her case for this additional conclusion via the following line of reasoning. Consider someone who once accepted external world skepticism but who, due to a rational argument like Rinard's, now decides that the rational course of action is to suspend judgment about external world skepticism. Rinard argues that such a suspender runs afoul of the following principle of rationality.

“Belief Endorsement: Rationality prohibits combinations of attitudes of the following kind: One believes P, but one takes some doxastic attitude, other than belief, toward the proposition that belief in P is rational.”¹⁰

Rinard asserts that *Belief Endorsement* is “highly plausible” and points out that when P stands for the proposition that “rationality requires suspension of judgment on external world skepticism,” such a suspender gets into trouble, given *Belief Endorsement*.¹¹ This is because the suspender believes P but rationally must suspend judgment about whether P is rational to believe—given that believing P rationally entails suspending judgment about the reliability of complex reasoning and the arguments that would justify believing that P is rational to believe would require relying on complex reasoning.¹²

A suspender might then give up their belief that rationality requires suspension of judgement on external world skepticism. They may instead opt to suspend judgment about whether rationality requires suspension of judgment on external world skepticism. But Rinard argues that this will not work because such a suspender runs afoul of what she claims is another principle of rationality.

“Endorsement: Rationality prohibits combinations of attitudes of the following kind: One takes doxastic attitude D toward P, but one takes some doxastic attitude, other than belief, toward the proposition that taking D to P is rational.”¹³

This latter kind of suspender runs afoul of *Endorsement* because this suspender suspends judgment about P but fails to believe that suspending judgment about P is rational. Rinard argues that *Endorsement* ought to be accepted because in epistemology “we should aim for simplicity and elegance in all our theorizing” and that the simplest theory is one in which we treat all doxastic attitudes alike

¹⁰ Rinard 2018, 257.

¹¹ Rinard 2018, 257

¹² Rinard 2018, 257.

¹³ Rinard 2018, 258.

(where the doxastic attitudes include belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment).¹⁴ If one accepts *Belief Endorsement* along with Rinard's commitment to and interpretation of the virtue of simplicity, then one has at least an initial reason to accept *Endorsement* too, and to give up this form of suspension of judgment about the existence of the external world as a result. We now have a sufficient sketch of Rinard's argument to begin examining routes by which the skeptic might resist Rinard's argument in epistemically respectable ways that Rinard does not consider in her paper.

II. Knowledge versus Justification

Rinard's reconstructed argument for external world skepticism is supposed to be an ecumenical presentation that accurately captures all the standard philosophical arguments for external world skepticism. If it is, all standard philosophical skeptics have the burden of finding a flaw in Rinard's reasoning at a later step. But I do not think Rinard's presentation of the standard philosophical argument is as ecumenical as she suggests. This is, in part, because one can be a skeptic about *knowledge* of the external world, without being a skeptic about *justification* of the external world.¹⁵

Such a skeptic could, for example, reject Rinard's third premise—that neither Normal nor BIV is intrinsically more worthy of belief, independently of one's evidence. Such a skeptic about knowledge could argue instead that they have some epistemic reason to favor Normal over BIV, while denying that this limited level of justification is sufficient for knowledge. Alternatively, a skeptic could deny the inference from (1) – (3) to the sub-conclusion that one neither has knowledge nor is justified in believing that BIV is false. They could hold that the sub-conclusion only rules out knowledge, but not some lower level of justification for belief. Such a skeptic could then accept a parallel argument concerning skepticism about the past, but the parallel argument would only undermine their knowledge about the past, not their justification in their beliefs about the past. And so long as the skeptic continues to rationally hold that they are justified in their beliefs about the past, Rinard's argument does not give them any reason to conclude that they are not rational in relying on beliefs generated by complex reasoning.

¹⁴ Rinard 2018, 258. Rinard, for practical purposes, restricts the class of possible doxastic attitudes in this case to belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment. Two other methods by which one might try to reject Rinard's argument are (1) to employ additional doxastic attitudes beyond the three listed, and/or (2) to reject Rinard's account of the nature and virtue of simplicity in epistemic theorizing. See Rinard 2018, 260-261 for some discussion of the first method.

¹⁵ Rinard's reconstructed argument for external world skepticism fails for additional reasons to capture the full gamut of available arguments for external world skepticism. For example, Rinard's reconstruction focuses on situations where a skeptic believes that their evidence is neutral between *two* competing hypotheses—i.e. between “Normal” and “BIV.” But some skeptical arguments rely on premises that posit *multiple* hypotheses that are evidentially neutral in comparison to hypotheses like Rinard's “Normal.” See, for example, Walker 2015.

Importantly, I think the kind of limited skepticism I am discussing here, whereby one denies knowledge of the external world but not justification for beliefs about it, represents a live and relatively common skeptical position. This is evidenced by the seeming popularity of this combination of views among those identifying as “skeptical invariantists” or “skeptical infallibilists” about knowledge.¹⁶ Take, for example, recent work by Gillian Russell in which she distinguishes “weak skepticism” (i.e. the view “that no-one knows anything”) from “strong skepticism” (i.e. the view “that no-one has any justification for their beliefs”).¹⁷ Russell uses the term ‘skeptical invariantism’ to “refer to any of the views on which most knowledge ascriptions are false because knows that is demanding.”¹⁸ Russell defends skeptical invariantism, so understood, concluding that “it is clear that skeptical invariantism is weak skepticism—skepticism about knowledge, not justification” and that “acquiescing to skeptical invariantism is no scandal to philosophy.”¹⁹ Similarly, Greg Stoutenburg distinguishes between “extreme skeptics who think that even our epistemic justification is questionable or non-existent” from “less-extreme skeptics who think that although our epistemic justification rarely or never meets the infallibilist standard expressed by a claim to know, we nevertheless enjoy solid justification for many ordinary beliefs.”²⁰ Stoutenburg, defends “infallibilist invariantism” about knowledge (i.e. the view that “S knowing that p is the very same state as S believing that p with infallible justification), which is a form of the “less-extreme” skepticism about knowledge and infallible justification, but not of “extreme” skepticism about justification full stop.²¹ Thus, for such infallibilists about knowledge, Rinard’s arguments won’t apply because their skepticism is motivated by their high standards for the level of justification required for *knowledge* and generally not because they think we lack any justification for *beliefs* about the external world.²²

¹⁶ In many contexts, ‘infallibilism,’ ‘skeptical infallibilism,’ and ‘skeptical invariantism’ can be treated as interchangeable. But this is not always the case—for example, on views which hold that we can often obtain infallible certainty or on views which hold that ‘know’ has a single meaning requiring less than maximal justification but on which we still do not know much, if anything. For relevant discussion see Kyriacou 2021b.

¹⁷ Russell 2022, 818.

¹⁸ Russell 2022, 792.

¹⁹ Russell 2022, 818.

²⁰ Stoutenburg 2021, 96.

²¹ Stoutenburg 2021, 80.

²² For some addition recent defenses of skeptical infallibilism see Kyriacou 2017, 2021a and Climenhaga 2021, forthcoming. Note also that the invariantist position that philosophers typically take other than skeptical invariantism (‘moderate invariantism’) still requires some moderate level of justification. See, for example Rysiew 2001, Brown 2006, and Gerken 2017. For a discussion of skeptical and moderate invariantism, see Hawthorne 2004. Contextualists and proponents of pragmatic encroachment also permit cases where one is justified but does not know. It is just that on these views how big the gap is between minimal justification and justification-sufficient-for-knowledge (or in the contextualist’s case: justification-sufficient-for-‘knowledge’) can change from context to context. See, for example, DeRose 1992 and Stanley 2005.

But skeptical infallibilists aren't the only ones who have the theoretical tools needed to permit adopting skepticism about knowledge of the external world without also embracing skepticism about justified belief about the external world. Even among fallibilists, it is fairly standard to think that a certain threshold of justification higher than the bare minimum must be met in order for something to count as knowledge. On any account where the level of justification required for justified belief is lower than the level of justification required for knowledge, there is theoretical space for one to be an external world skeptic about knowledge but not justified belief. As just one example of how such an account could go, consider phenomenal conservatism. Michael Huemer defines phenomenal conservatism as the view that “[i]f it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p.”²³ For Huemer, sensory experiences, memory experiences, introspective appearances, and intuitions are all routes by which some proposition can seem to be the case for a subject.²⁴ Note that phenomenal conservatism, so construed, states that such seemings provide subjects only with *at least some* degree of justification. One can accept phenomenal conservatism while holding that the level of justification one gains from such seemings alone is sufficient for belief but insufficient for knowledge. If one also has reason to think that we lack other means to gain additional justification for our beliefs, one could then rationally conclude that we have justification for various beliefs about the external world while lacking any knowledge of the external world. A similar position could be constructed on a variety of other accounts on which we can gain a limited degree of justification sufficient for justified belief but insufficient for knowledge.

Such a position could be used by a skeptic to continue relying on their memorial beliefs and, as a result, their complex reasoning. For example, a skeptic could combine any of the above views that allow for them to have justified beliefs about the external world without knowledge of the external world with a *justified belief norm of action*—i.e., a view on which one is practically justified in acting on one's justified beliefs. Thus, such a skeptic would consider themselves practically justified in acting on their justified beliefs about the external world, while lacking any knowledge of the external world. By use of analogous reasoning, the skeptic could conclude that they have justified memorial beliefs without having any knowledge for those beliefs. Such a skeptic could then apply the same justified belief norm of action to continue relying on and acting on their memorial beliefs. This, in turn, would allow the skeptic to continue to rely on and retain beliefs formed on the basis of complex reasoning. All the skeptic would need to deny is that they *know* the things believed on the basis of complex

²³ Huemer 2006, 148.

²⁴ Huemer 2006, 157.

reasoning. This is almost certainly the route that would be taken by a skeptical infallibilist who thinks that skeptical infallibilism is “no scandal in philosophy” and that the skeptical infallibilist can “nevertheless enjoy solid justification for many ordinary beliefs.” But this is also a position open in principle to many kinds of fallibilists.

Thus, Rinard’s argument only works for a subset of external world skeptics: those who are skeptical about knowledge *and* justified belief of the external world.²⁵ Perhaps this is not much of a problem for Rinard. After all, perhaps it is the skeptic about knowledge *and* justified belief of the external world who is best viewed as the quintessential lost cause for rational persuasion. But I think the class of skeptics for whom Rinard’s arguments ought to be persuasive can be narrowed more still.

III. Rationality versus Accuracy

Rinard’s argument, if correct, shows that taking any doxastic attitude toward external world skepticism other than disbelief (i.e. believing that it is false) is *irrational* for at least some external world skeptics. But Rinard does not claim that her argument shows that external world skepticism is *false*. On the contrary, Rinard says that she does not “try to diagnose the flaw in the skeptical argument” and that she does not “isolate a particular premise as false, and explain why, despite its falsity, we found it compelling.”²⁶ Thus, rather than arguing that external world skepticism is false, Rinard appears to be arguing merely that the only rational doxastic position available is believing that external world skepticism is false.

I argue in this section that the skeptic who values having accurate beliefs over being rational can resist Rinard’s argument because her argument does not provide (nor does it claim to provide) evidence that external world skepticism is false. This response to Rinard is grounded in two things: (i) what the skeptic values, and (ii) how the skeptic understands the relationship between rationality and what the skeptic values. It is common to value having accurate beliefs (i.e. having beliefs that are true and not having beliefs that are false). It is also common to value rationality. On many accounts of rationality, often promoting one of these values simultaneously promotes the other. Thus, under many circumstances we need not ask which, if either, value is more fundamental. But to the extent that the two aims do come apart, it is not clear that rationality has any value independent of the role it normally

²⁵ For the sake of simplicity, I am treating ‘knowledge’ as if it refers to a single epistemic state. Things get even more complicated if one thinks that there is more than one epistemic state that can properly be picked out by the term ‘knowledge.’ On such a view, one might be skeptical about ‘knowledge’ in sense A but not in sense B. For some defenses of ambiguity theories of ‘know’ see Malcom 1952, Engel 2004, Steup 2005, van Woudenberg 2005, Reed 2013, and Satta 2018a, 2018b.

²⁶ Rinard 2018, 242.

helps us in achieving other goals, like obtaining true beliefs, justified beliefs, or knowledge and avoiding false or unjustified beliefs.

While the matter is controversial, one viable position the skeptic can take is that truth is valuable for its own sake and that rationality is valuable only as a means to other ends, like truth or accuracy. Another way to put the matter is that the skeptic can consider truth to have final value, while considering rationality to have only instrumental value. This seems like a live philosophical option given that various philosophers have put forward views of rationality which suggest that rationality's value comes from its role in promoting truth or accuracy.²⁷

The skeptic who considers truth to have final value but considers rationality to have only instrumental value should care about being rational only to the extent that doing so actually is instrumental in helping the skeptic achieve truth, accuracy, or other things the skeptic values.²⁸ But Rinard has not given us any reason to think that her particular conception of rationality is one that promotes truth, accuracy, or other things the skeptic values. Without any such arguments from Rinard, I think a skeptic can reasonably conclude that the burden of proof remains with Rinard to show that there is such a connection. I also think that the skeptic can conclude that until arguments have been offered, they have good epistemic grounds for not giving up their external world skepticism in response to Rinard's arguments. This is because they think their evidence still supports external world skepticism, they haven't been given a reason to think otherwise, and they can justifiably conclude that believing what their evidence supports is their best way to try to maximize the accuracy of their beliefs.

A proponent of Rinard's argument might argue that Rinard doesn't have a burden of proof to show that there is a connection between rationality, as Rinard understands it, and belief accuracy. Such a proponent might argue that we should *assume* there is a connection between being rational, as Rinard understands it, and having accurate beliefs and that the skeptic has the burden of proof to show that there *isn't* such a connection. But thinking from the skeptic's point of view—which is the perspective Rinard commits herself to taking in her paper—there seem to be good reasons to reject that the skeptic has the burden of proof here. Skeptics, as a general matter, aren't inclined to merely assume things. If one posits a connection between rationality and belief accuracy, it seems epistemically reasonable for the skeptic to require good arguments or evidence showing there is such a connection before accepting that there is such a connection. And Rinard has not provided such arguments or evidence.

²⁷ See, for example, Horowitz 2014, Wedgwood 2017, and Schoenfeld 2019. For further discussion, see Ye (2023). Once again, this picture can be made more complicated if one adopts certain theories about the nature of rationality (or 'rationality'). For example, Siscoe (2023) argues that 'rationality' is an absolute gradable adjective.

²⁸ The sense of 'should' I employ here is prudential.

The skeptic's reasonable epistemic grounds for requiring arguments or evidence for the connection between belief accuracy and Rinard's conception of rationality is bolstered by the multitude of ways in which rationality has been understood by epistemologists. As L. J. Cohen has noted, "at least nine types of rationality, or roles for the faculty of reason, seem to be commonly recognized in Western culture."²⁹ And Blake Roeber has identified several different types of rationality beyond Cohen's nine, concluding that as "as Plantinga (1993), Worsnip (2015), and others make clear, there are more than just the nine types enumerated by Cohen."³⁰ Given that there are numerous types of rationality, a skeptic might reasonably think that while some conceptions of rationality may be such that increases in one's rationality increase the likelihood that one's beliefs are accurate, it is unclear that *all* conceptions of rationality are such. The skeptic might also reasonably note that Rinard adopts a very specific conception of rationality, which incorporates a variety of controversial principles. Given the complexity and specificity of her conception of rationality, it might seem reasonable to the skeptic that there is a good chance that adoption of one or more of the specific principles of rationality Rinard puts forward (and that she requires for her argument against at least some forms of external world skepticism to work) do not increase the likelihood that one would increase their belief accuracy. Thus, by their own lights, the skeptic has good reason to reject that they have the burden of proof to show that there is not a connection between increasing belief accuracy and Rinard's specific conception of rationality.

A skeptic who rejects that they have such a burden of proof might be able to further strengthen their position if they were to argue that Rinard's argument that it is irrational to fail to disbelieve external world skepticism itself provides the skeptic with evidence that Rinard's conception of rationality lacks such a connection to truth. The skeptic can argue that this is because Rinard's argument says that it is irrational for the skeptic to believe what the skeptic has good grounds to think their evidence favors (external world skepticism) and does so *without* providing any reason to think that the skeptic is wrong about what their evidence is or how they've interpreted it. Here's why this is so, in virtue of things Rinard herself acknowledges: The skeptic does not think the evidence favors rejection of external world skepticism. The conclusion of Rinard's argument is that rationality requires the skeptic to reject external world skepticism (and thus to reject a view that the skeptic thinks their evidence supports). But this argument does nothing to change the skeptic's evidence or directly challenge how the skeptic has interpreted their evidence. Thus, a skeptic could plausibly conclude that

²⁹ Cohen 2010, 663.

³⁰ Roeber 2020, 417.

the best explanation for this is that Rinard's conception of rationality lacks a connection to the truth, at least regarding the question of the truth of external world skepticism.

The proponent of Rinard's argument might claim in response that Rinard's argument *does* change the skeptic's evidence about the truth of external world skepticism. They might claim that evidence that failing to disbelieve external world skepticism is irrational provides evidence that external world skepticism is not true. But such a response, on its own, begs the question. It assumes the very thing under issue: namely, that there is a connection between rationality and truth such that evidence for the rationality of believing p provides one with evidence that p is true. Because this line of reasoning begs the question against the skeptic, the skeptic is epistemically entitled to reject it.

One might worry that my response here makes it too easy to retain one's beliefs in the face of evidence of irrationality. But I don't think this is so. My response relies on several specific features of this case. First, the skeptic has evidence that seems to them to support external world skepticism. Second, the skeptic does not have any evidence that they have misinterpreted or misunderstood the significance of their evidence. Third, the skeptic lacks any evidence that adherence to the specific conception of rationality their beliefs are being assessed by will increase the likelihood that their beliefs are accurate. All these things are required on my account for the skeptic who values accurate beliefs over rational beliefs to retain their beliefs in response to a challenge that doing so is irrational. In most circumstances where one might be tempted to retain beliefs in the face of evidence that doing so would be irrational, one or more of these three features does not obtain. This can be elucidated with examples.

Consider the following case.³¹ Randall believes that over the course of the next few decades the stock market will have an average annual return of over 8%. His evidence for this conclusion is that his friend showed him a complicated quant model. But Randall also believes that it is irrational to trust his reasoning for this conclusion because he does not understand quant models. Does my position suggest that Randall can continue to hold his belief that the stock market will have an average annual return of over 8%, despite the evidence that he is being irrational, so long as he insists that rationality does not always yield the highest investment return and the latter is what he ultimately values? No. In this case Randall lacks any evidence that he has interpreted his evidence correctly. The fact that he doesn't understand quant models gives him excellent reason to think it likely that he has misinterpreted or misunderstood the significance of his evidence. Randall seems able to identify that

³¹ This example comes from an anonymous referee. It is a modification of an example given in Rinard 2018, 250.

his belief is irrational *because* he can identify how he's failed to base his belief appropriately on his evidence. Without being able to understand quant models (and without receiving testimony from someone who does), the quant model does not provide Randall with evidence in favor of the view that the stock market will have an average annual return of over 8%, even if that same quant model would constitute evidence for an expert who recognizes that they can properly interpret such models.

Consider another example. Anetra believes that over the course of the next few decades the stock market will have an average annual return of over 8%. Her evidence for this conclusion is that her friend Marcia showed her a complicated quant model and Marcia told her that, in her expert opinion, the quant model strongly indicated that the stock market would have an average annual return of over 8%. Anetra has good evidence that Marcia is a reliable testifier. Anetra is also capable of understanding and interpreting complex quant models, and based on her own interpretation she concludes that the model strongly indicates that the stock market will have an average annual return of over 8% for the next few decades. On this basis, Anetra forms the justified belief that the average annual return on the stock market will be over 8% for the next few decades.

Later, Anetra's friend Sasha presents Anetra with a series of complex arguments meant to show that Anetra's belief about the stock market is irrational, at least according to how Sasha conceives of rationality. Sasha also presents Anetra with a set of arguments meant to show that adhering to Sasha's conception of rationality increases, on balance, one's likelihood of having accurate beliefs. Suppose Anetra cannot find a flaw in these arguments. Suppose also that Sasha testifies that she believes that adhering to her conception of rationality generally increases one's likelihood of having accurate beliefs and that Anetra has good reason to think that Sasha is a reliable testifier on this topic.

Does my position suggest that Anetra can continue to hold, with the same level of confidence, her belief that the stock market will have an average annual return of over 8% despite the evidence and arguments she has received from Sasha, even if Anetra values accurate beliefs over rational ones? No. This is because, unlike the skeptic, Anetra now has good reason to think that her belief about the stock market is irrational *according to a conception of rationality that she has evidence that, when adhered to, generally increases the likelihood that one's beliefs are accurate*. Even if Anetra cannot see the flaw in her reasoning for her initial belief about the stock market, unlike the skeptic, she now has at least indirect or second-order evidence that decreases the likelihood that her initial belief about the stock market is correct. This is because she has evidence that her belief is irrational *and* evidence that giving up irrational beliefs in favor of rational ones is likely to increase the accuracy of her beliefs. Thus, Anetra has evidence that she can best meet her epistemic goal of maximizing belief accuracy by trying to have beliefs that

are rational, at least as Sasha conceives of rationality. But this is precisely the kind of evidence the skeptic does not get with Rinard's argument. Rinard has not given the skeptic any evidence—by argument or by testimony—to think that conforming to her conception of rationality increases the likelihood that one's beliefs will be accurate. And without such evidence, a skeptic who values accurate beliefs over rational beliefs need not be moved by Rinard's arguments.

IV. Belief versus Suspension

So far, I have argued that a skeptic can reject Rinard's argument (1) by being a skeptic about knowledge but not justification of the external world or (2) by prioritizing obtaining true beliefs or avoiding false beliefs (i.e. obtaining belief accuracy) over being rational. But for even the skeptic who thinks we lack both knowledge and justification of the external world and who, as a general matter, wants to prioritize being rational, I think there is yet another way to reject Rinard's conclusion that one must reject external world skepticism. This third response is available to the skeptic who Rinard refers to as an unconfident suspender—i.e. a skeptic who both suspends judgment about external world skepticism and who suspends judgment about whether it is rational to do so. The only part of Rinard's initial argument that the unconfident suspender needs to respond to is Rinard's claim that the unconfident suspender violates the following principle of rationality:

“Endorsement: Rationality prohibits combinations of attitudes of the following kind: One takes doxastic attitude D toward P, but one takes some doxastic attitude, other than belief, toward the proposition that taking D to P is rational.”

Rinard considers three kinds of doxastic attitudes at this point in her paper: belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment. Rinard's *Endorsement*, which she labels a generalization of her *Belief Endorsement* principle, assumes that all doxastic attitudes operate similarly enough so that the rational restrictions *Belief Endorsement* posits apply to all doxastic attitudes. The unconfident suspender can reject *Endorsement* by rejecting that the rationality of holding different doxastic attitudes is in fact so similar. The unconfident suspender can instead argue that there are relevant differences in the conditions under which it is rational to hold different doxastic attitudes. More specifically, the unconfident suspender can argue that *Endorsement* is false, at least when suspension of judgment is included as one of the relevant doxastic attitudes, by arguing that suspension of judgment operates differently than belief and non-belief as the rational default doxastic attitude.

By “the rational default doxastic attitude,” I mean the doxastic attitude that it is presumptively rational to adopt unless one has reason to do otherwise. On this picture, one who holds the rational

default doxastic attitude about a proposition does not bear the burden of proof, while those who take any other doxastic attitude toward that proposition do have a burden of proof (or at least a burden of justification). Another way to put the matter is that the rational default doxastic attitude is the doxastic attitude we should adopt when we lack a positive reason to adopt any other doxastic attitude. Because we may very often have reasons to adopt doxastic attitudes other than the default attitude, something's being the default doxastic attitude doesn't mean that it's the one we do or should hold most often. But that is not a problem, because being frequently held is not a criterion for something being the rational default doxastic attitude.

That there should be a rational default doxastic attitude fits neatly with Rinard's rejection of the possibility of doxastic dilemmas—i.e. her rejection of situations in which “rationality prohibits believing P, rationality prohibits disbelieving P, and rationality prohibits suspending judgment on P.”³² The rational default doxastic attitude is the one that it is permissible to fall back on when the evidence or rationality does not dictate that we should do otherwise. That there is some such rational default doxastic attitude seems plausible. In addition, it seems plausible that suspension of judgment is that rational default doxastic attitude. Typically, we think that when we lack reason to believe or disbelieve something that suspension of judgment is the rational option to go with instead. Some may think that they typically have reason to believe or disbelieve things, such that they don't often find themselves in the position of needing to fall back on suspension of belief. But almost all of us are likely familiar with at least some situations where we lacked evidence or reasons to go with any other doxastic attitude, and so we defaulted to suspension of judgment as a result.

Recently, A. K. Flowerree has identified some important ways in which suspending judgment (which she refers to as “withholding judgment”) differs from its doxastic compatriots, belief and disbelief.³³ I will argue that these differences—which Flowerree usefully refers to as “asymmetries”—support the view that suspending judgment is the rational default doxastic attitude (understood, as before, simply as the doxastic attitude that it is presumptively rational to adopt unless one has reason to do otherwise). For our purposes, two asymmetries are especially worth noting.

First, Flowerree identifies that while belief and disbelief should be “understood in terms of the evidence being sufficiently strong for holding some attitude,” suspending judgment is best understood as a function of neither believing nor disbelieving being rational.³⁴ That is to say, rational

³² Rinard 2018, 259.

³³ Flowerree 2021, 129.

³⁴ Flowerree 2021, 128-29.

suspension of judgment is a “*via negativa*”—i.e. rational suspension of judgment “is a function of whether the evidence fails to make rational belief or disbelief.”³⁵ This means, as Flowerree notes, that rational suspension of judgment “does not hold a symmetrical place in the rationality economy, but rather a contrastive one.”³⁶ In other words, suspension of judgment is the position one can rationally retreat to when no other doxastic attitude is appropriate. This is precisely what it means for suspending judgment to be the rational default doxastic attitude.

Second, Flowerree notes that while “belief that *p* and disbelief that *p* involve...staking a claim about the way the world is,” in contrast, “withholding is not a commitment to anything being the case in the actual world.”³⁷ That is to say, unlike belief and disbelief, suspension of judgment, is “only a reflection of one’s evidential relationship to *p*.”³⁸ Recognition of this asymmetry provides another reason why suspension of judgment makes a plausible rational default doxastic attitude. It is an attitude where—in the absence of evidence sufficient for one to stake a claim about the way the world is—one merely adopts an attitude about the nature of one’s evidence.

Flowerree’s observations about the important differences between suspension of judgment on the one hand and belief and disbelief on the other provide the skeptic with principled grounds for rejecting the move from Rinard’s *Belief Endorsement* principle to her more general *Endorsement* principle. This is, in part, because Flowerree’s observations provide reasons for thinking that ways in which rationality limits when we can believe *p* won’t necessarily provide analogous limits about when we can suspend judgment about *p*. It is also, in part, because Flowerree’s observations highlight ways in which suspension of belief holds a special place in the “rationality economy” whereby it can be the rational doxastic attitude to adopt merely in virtue of no other doxastic attitude being rational to adopt.

If suspension of judgment is the rational default doxastic attitude—and it seems we have good reasons to think that it is—then the skeptic may reasonably reject the move from *Belief Endorsement* to *Endorsement* on the grounds that *Endorsement* is false because, unlike belief or disbelief, rationality does not prohibit combinations of one believing, disbelieving, or suspending judgment about *p* while suspending judgment about whether doing so is rational. Even for a skeptic who might think this solution comes at some theoretical cost, such a skeptic could argue that it is less of a theoretical cost than the implications of Rinard’s argument. To see why consider the following: If the external world skeptic accepts everything that Rinard has put forward, they end up concluding that they are rationally

³⁵ Flowerree 2021, 130.

³⁶ Flowerree 2021, 130.

³⁷ Flowerree 2021, 130.

³⁸ Flowerree 2021, 130.

required to reject external world skepticism, even though they do not think that their evidence supports rejecting external world skepticism. The skeptic could argue that this violates the following plausible principle of rationality:

Non-Evidential Disbelief: It is irrational to disbelieve p when one's evidence does not support disbelieving p .

Just as many of Rinard's principles and assumptions are plausible but controversial, so too *Non-Evidential Disbelief* is plausible but controversial. If a skeptic takes *Non-Evidential Disbelief* to be more plausible than *Endorsement*, then arguably the skeptic could rationally reject *Endorsement* because *Endorsement* combined with the rest of Rinard's argument led the skeptic to violate *Non-Evidential Disbelief*.³⁹

Before concluding this section, it's worth responding to what Rinard claims is an "unfortunate feature" of the unconfident suspender's position. In describing this feature, Rinard writes of the unconfident suspender that:

"Their position of radical uncertainty was not adopted out of the blue, for no reason whatsoever; rather it was prompted by seeing how skepticism is self-undermining. But, since they suspend judgment on propositions about the past, and because these considerations are complex, they know nothing of them now. They are unsure of many things, but they have no idea why. Having adopted this position, they can no longer see any reason for maintaining it. It is hard to see how such a position could be rational."⁴⁰

There are several reasons why this is unlikely to be an unfortunate feature that the unconfident suspender is saddled with. First, this line of reasoning only applies to the unconfident suspender who retreated from believing external world skepticism was true to suspending judgment about whether it is rational to suspend judgment about external world skepticism on the basis of Rinard's argument—i.e. the argument only applies to the skeptic who was prompted to become an unconfident suspender "by seeing how skepticism is self-undermining" from the perspective of Rinard's argument. Therefore, this critique doesn't pose a problem for a skeptic who was already an unconfident suspender prior to encountering Rinard's argument. For such an unconfident suspender, Rinard's arguments are

³⁹ Alternatively, the skeptic could argue that adding *Non-Evidential Disbelief* to their set of background assumptions means that the skeptic does not violate *Endorsement*. They could do this by arguing that none of Rinard's arguments are sufficiently strong to overcome the skeptic's rational default presumption to suspend belief about external world skepticism. This would remove any violation of *Endorsement* because the skeptic could continue to believe that they are rational in suspending judgment about external world skepticism. This latter route might also work in the case of Rinard's "confident suspender."

⁴⁰ Rinard 2018, 258.

irrelevant to their own position up until Rinard introduces the *Endorsement* principle.⁴¹ Thus, for the preexisting unconfident suspender, it would seem that adopting suspension of belief as the default rational doxastic attitude remains a sufficient response to Rinard's argument.

But what about the skeptic who in fact has modified their position based on Rinard's arguments? I think there are a variety of epistemically respectable ways such a skeptic can respond if they attend carefully to what Rinard has said. Rinard claims that because unconfident suspenders "suspend judgment on propositions about the past, and because these considerations are complex, they know nothing of them now." I take it that "these considerations" here refers to the arguments and reasons Rinard has given against believing that external world skepticism is true. But notice that Rinard doesn't say that the unconfident suspender no longer knows the propositions comprising these arguments to be true or no longer knows the arguments to be sound. Rather, she says that unconfident suspenders "know nothing *of* them now" such that they have "no idea why" they are so unsure of many things.

But this does not follow. Rather, Rinard's line of reasoning here seems to conflate a lack of knowledge of the *truth* of propositions or the *soundness* of arguments with a *lack of understanding or ideas* about those propositions or arguments. The unconfident suspender is still familiar with the relevant considerations motivating their skeptical position. They still have the ideas in their head and can run through the reasoning. They have not been cut off from the arguments. Rather, all they have been cut off from is knowledge, or perhaps also confidence or justification, that the reasoning is correct. They can still "see" the reasons for maintaining their position, they just lack knowledge as to whether their reasoning is right. But the unconfident suspender doesn't claim to have that knowledge. The unconfident suspender can and should readily admit that their epistemic position is poor, but contra Rinard they retain an understanding of the reasons why they think this. This understanding can ground a reasonable suspicion about moving from their seemings or appearances of an external world to an uncritical acceptance of the view that they have knowledge or justified beliefs about such a world.

It seems worth noting that an unconfident suspender can supplement their response to Rinard's critique by appealing to either of the previous two arguments made in this paper. First, such an unconfident suspender could claim that they retain justification for beliefs about the past and about complex reasoning, even if they no longer have knowledge about such things. An unconfident suspender who claims only to lack knowledge of the external world while claiming to retain justified

⁴¹ Perhaps some of Rinard's other arguments could be modified to apply to the unconfident suspender, but the unconfident suspender need not be moved until such arguments are in fact made.

beliefs about the external world can appeal to their justified beliefs about the past and complex reasoning to ground their suspension of judgment about the rationality of suspending judgment about external world skepticism. Second, note that the conclusion of Rinard's reasoning here is that it "is hard to see how such a position could be rational." For the unconfident suspender more committed to avoiding inaccurate doxastic attitudes than having rational beliefs, they can respond to this critique using the same kinds of arguments developed in the previous section, given that this critique also does not provide the unconfident suspender with any new reason to think that they have inaccurate doxastic attitudes.

V. Conclusion

Rinard offers a creative means by which to reason with the skeptic.⁴² For a skeptic with a certain set of assumptions and values, I suspect that Rinard's argument could be convincing. But for many external world skeptics, Rinard's argument relies on assumptions that I think the external world skeptic both could and would reasonably reject. That said, my response to Rinard bolsters her claim that there is plenty of reasoned discussion for skeptics and non-skeptics to have with one another.⁴³

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⁴² Rinard and I have both focused on one kind of issue the skeptic and non-skeptic can reason about: whether external world skepticism is true. But there are other kinds of reasoned discussions to be had about skepticism, such as what counts as external world skepticism and what the moral or practical significance would be if external world skepticism were true. Good discussions of some of these issues can be found in Chalmers 2005 and Chalmers 2022 (especially chapters 17 and 18).

⁴³ Thanks to Yuval Avnur, Amy Flowerree, Gregory Gaboardi, Jared Peterson, Baron Reed, Bruce Russell, Mark Walker, and two anonymous reviewers from this journal for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

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