

## THE DEFECT IN EFFECTIVE SKEPTICAL SCENARIOS

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### ABSTRACT

What epistemic defect needs to show up in a skeptical scenario if it is to effectively target some belief? According to the false belief account, the targeted belief must be false in the skeptical scenario. According to the competing ignorance account, the targeted belief must fall short of being knowledge in the skeptical scenario. This paper argues for two claims. The first is that, contrary to what is often assumed, the ignorance account is superior to the false belief account. The second is that the ignorance account ultimately hobbles the skeptic. It does so for two reasons. First, when this account is joined with either a closure-based skeptical argument or a skeptical underdetermination argument, the best the skeptic can do is show that we don't know that we know. And second, the ignorance account directly implies the maligned KK principle.

### 1. Introduction

Skeptical scenarios are specially designed by the skeptic for use in attempts to show that we lack knowledge in some broad area: the brain-in-a-vat scenario is used to argue that we lack knowledge of the external world; a scenario in which other people are robots without mental states is used to argue that we have no knowledge of other minds; and a scenario in which you came into existence moments ago with implanted memories is used to show that you lack knowledge of the past.

Exactly what epistemic defect has to show up in a skeptical scenario if it is to effectively target some belief? Skeptics and anti-skeptics are equally obligated to answer this question, as long as on the intended sense of effective, an effective scenario need not be a scenario that can ultimately be used to successfully show that we lack knowledge in some area. Consider a lower bar for effectiveness: to be

effective, in this sense, a scenario just has to trigger familiar skeptical worries. This is something that the three scenarios mentioned at the beginning clearly do relative to the mentioned target beliefs. It is also something that some applications of familiar scenarios clearly fail to do. For example, the memory implant scenario, while effective for targeting beliefs about the past, is not effective for targeting present perceptually-based beliefs about one's present immediate environment.

This paper looks at two competing accounts of the needed defect.<sup>1</sup> According to the false belief account, the targeted belief must be false in a skeptical scenario if that scenario is to be effective.<sup>2</sup> According to the ignorance account, the targeted belief must (in the effective skeptical scenario) fall short of the knowledge mark.<sup>3</sup> I have two aims. The first is to answer this question: what is the underlying feature of skeptical scenarios that triggers the worry that we don't know some target claim? Here I will argue against the false belief account of this phenomenon, and in favor of the ignorance account of it. The second aim concerns two important arguments in the skeptic's arsenal that make appeal to skeptical scenarios. One of these employs a closure principle and the other an underdetermination principle. My second aim is to

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions that focus on other aspects of effective skeptical scenarios, see Beebe (2010), Cross (2010), and Kung (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking the false belief account does not require that a targeted belief be formed in a skeptical scenario. It says such a belief would be false if it was formed. For ease of exposition, I will suppose the relevant beliefs are formed.

<sup>3</sup> The accounts overlap since one way that a belief can fail to be knowledge is by being false. But because there are other ways that a belief can fail to be knowledge, the ignorance account is broader than the false belief account.

answer this question: how cogent are these arguments when the ignorance account is used to generate the skeptical scenarios that are appealed to in these arguments? I will argue that the arguments in question are not cogent. The result is that the kind of defect that makes skeptical scenarios effective reveals a defect in the case for some important brands of skepticism.

In Section 2, I look at how two prominent skeptical arguments presuppose the false belief account. In Section 3, I present reasons for thinking that the ignorance account does the better job of explaining the range of scenarios that trigger skeptical worries. In Section 4, I bring out two difficulties that arise when the ignorance account is combined with the two principal skeptical arguments. In Section 5, I point out that this refutation makes use of almost nothing but the skeptic's own weapons; I also offer some reflections on the conception of knowledge at work in the refutation.

## **2. The False Belief Account and Two Skeptical Arguments**

Let's begin with closure-based skeptical arguments. The most common example found in the literature involves a scenario in which you are a brain in a vat that has experiences that make it seem to you that you have hands; this scenario is then used to target your belief that you have hands. Letting 'K' stand for 'you know that', 'h' for 'you have hands', and 'biv' for 'you are a brain in a vat', the argument runs:

- (1)  $[Kh \ \& \ K(h \supset \sim biv)] \supset K\sim biv.$
- (2)  $\sim K\sim biv.$
- (3)  $K(h \supset \sim biv).$
- (4)  $\sim Kh.$

This argument presupposes the false belief account at (3). This is easy to show. Since knowledge requires truth, (3) entails that if you have hands then you are not a brain in a vat. Contraposing the latter we get: if you are a brain in a vat, then you don't have hands. This in turn implies that your belief, in the brain in a vat scenario, that you have hands, is false.

The false belief account is also presupposed in standard formulations of skeptical underdetermination arguments. Working with the same scenario and the same targeted belief, but now construing both you have hands and you are a brain in a vat as hypotheses that compete to explain your perceptual evidence, and letting 'e' stand for that evidence, this argument runs:

(5) If e is just as well explained by biv as it is by h, then  $\sim$ Kh.

(6) e is just as well explained by biv as it is by h.

(7)  $\sim$ Kh.

This argument presupposes the false belief account at (5). That premise is true only if the biv hypothesis and the hands hypothesis compete with one another. But this means that on the biv hypothesis, you must not have hands; and that in turn implies that your belief, in the biv scenario, that you have hands, is false.

Despite the tight connection between each of these two skeptical arguments and the false belief account, I will argue next that the ignorance account is superior in an important way to the false belief account.

### **3. Three Reasons In Support of the Ignorance Account**

Recall that the ignorance account says that a scenario is skeptically effective because in it the targeted belief falls short of the knowledge mark.<sup>4</sup> There are three reasons to favor the ignorance account over the false belief account.

The first appeals to other beliefs that can be effectively targeted. To see how this works, return to the example involving the brain in a vat hypothesis and your belief that you have hands. This example is not representative. In fact, it is importantly misleading. To see why, consider some other external world beliefs that the brain in a vat scenario effectively targets: for example, your belief that there is a chair in the room that you are presently in; or, for that matter, my belief that there is not a chair in the room that I am presently in. The brain in a vat scenario effectively targets both of these beliefs despite not entailing anything about whether either of us is in a room with a chair. No such entailments hold because whether one is a brain in a vat is quite independent of whether one is in a room with a chair. In fact the vast majority of our beliefs about the external world are like this. They are not automatically false if we are brains in vats.<sup>5</sup> And yet a brain-in-a-vat scenario can be used to effectively target them. This counts against the false belief account. And it counts in favor of the ignorance account since a brain in a vat's belief about whether

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<sup>4</sup> The ignorance account is suggested in Winters (1981) and Hetherington (1996). It may also be assumed in Schaffer (2010).

<sup>5</sup> As Stroud (1984, 14-15) points out, Moore (1959, 245) makes this point with his Duke of Devonshire case. However, neither Stroud nor Moore emphasizes, as I am, that these are competing accounts of effective skeptical scenarios. Also neither discusses the two advantages of the ignorance account over the false belief account that I discuss later in this section.

it is in a room with a chair can at best be fortuitously true and therefore not knowledge.

But can't defenders of the false belief account just reply by claiming that when the brain-in-a-vat scenario is fully specified, it includes the facts about the external world that make the targeted beliefs false? And isn't this exactly why we so often find deceivers at the center of skeptical scenarios? Deceivers are attractive because they naturally suggest the following chain of explanation. The subject's perceptual evidence is explained by some non-veridical experiences; those experiences are then explained by, say, a computer program; and that program is in turn explained by two features of a deceiver: his intention to deceive and his knowledge of the relevant part of the external world. It is at this last item that we find facts that make the targeted beliefs false. That the standard brain-in-a-vat story carries with it this chain of explanations seems to vindicate the false belief account.

But this is not right. The preceding brain in a vat story, though most familiar, is just one kind of skeptically effective scenario. The false belief account follows only if all skeptically effective scenarios are relevantly similar to it. But they are not. There are skeptically effective scenarios that do not include either the kind of deceiver just described or false beliefs. For example, consider a scenario that stars a deceiver who is too busy to oversee the moment-to-moment changes in a brain in a vat's immediate environment. So this deceiver simply programs the computer to cause one week of experiences in the brain in a vat without knowing what will occur in the brain in a vat's immediate environment over that time. Occasionally experiences had during

that time allow the brain in a vat to form a true belief. For example, suppose the brain in a vat has experiences that suggest he is talking to his best friend; this then leads the brain in a vat to infer that there is someone in the room with him. But suppose that all of this just happens to occur while the janitor is in the vat room emptying the trash. When someone who comes to believe in this way that there is someone in the room with him considers the possibility that they are a brain in a vat as just described, this triggers familiar skeptical worries.

Or consider an imperfect deceiver who occasionally fails to bring about wholly non-veridical experiences in his subjects. Suppose he absent-mindedly forgets that there is a computer in the brain in a vat's room and causes the brain in a vat to have an experience as of a computer. However this experience suggests a computer that differs in color, shape, size, etc. from the one that is actually in the brain in a vat's room. This experience leads the brain in a vat to correctly believe there is a computer in the room. The false belief account predicts that this is not an effective skeptical scenario. But this is not so: consideration of this scenario triggers the skeptical worry that maybe one doesn't know that they are in a room with a computer.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The busy and imperfect deceiver scenarios might suggest a third account of effective skeptical scenarios, one that says that the key epistemic defect in effective skeptical scenarios is a non-veridical experience. But this account is mistaken since it implies that no effective skeptical scenarios can be designed to target the beliefs of blindsighters. Because blindsighters have no visual experiences, they can easily distinguish their actual situation in which they have no visual experience from any proposed scenario in which they have a visual experience, including proposed scenarios in which they have non-veridical experiences. However there are effective skeptical scenarios that target blindsighter's beliefs; for example, scenarios in which their hunches about what is in their environment are caused by an unreliable process.

These two scenarios must be effective because the targeted beliefs fall short of the knowledge mark.<sup>7</sup> Moreover on the working assumption that effectiveness traces to a single defect, we can draw an important lesson about the scenarios that the false belief account certifies as effective. They are effective because the beliefs in them fall short of the knowledge mark, not because these beliefs are false.

The second reason to favor the ignorance account over the false belief account concerns parsimony. Consider again the underdetermination argument. The subject's sensory experiences are the data that needs to be explained. The explanations favored by the false belief account extend to encompass falsemakers for the targeted beliefs. By contrast, the explanations favored by the ignorance account are more parsimonious since they only encompass the computer hook-up. For example, in the busy and imperfect deceiver scenarios that were just spelled out, the brain in a vat's sensory experiences are explained without bringing in what makes the targeted beliefs false (or for that matter, what makes them true). This makes the hypotheses posited by the ignorance account more economical than the hypotheses posited by the false belief account.

And third the ignorance account does better when it comes to beliefs in necessary truths. Suppose Mary adds up her restaurant bill and correctly believes that this bill sums to 18.67. On the assumption that "this bill" rigidly designates the same

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If this is right, it follows that all accounts of skeptical effectiveness that entail that the subject has an experience are mistaken.

<sup>7</sup> More precisely because they are unwarranted, where this means they fail to meet at least one condition on knowledge besides the truth and belief conditions.



set of addends and on the assumption that arithmetical truths are necessarily true, the false belief account says there are no effective skeptical scenarios that target this belief. But that is not so. Mary might be rightly worried that her belief is not to be trusted, perhaps because of Benaceraff-style reasons to think that beliefs about numbers cannot stand in the relations to numbers that is necessary for those beliefs to be warranted, or perhaps because she has reason to think that the belief forming method that she used is not globally reliable.<sup>8</sup> The ignorance account, but not the false belief account, can account for this scenario's effectiveness.<sup>9</sup>

On the face of it, the move to the ignorance account is good news for the skeptic since it certifies more scenarios as skeptically effective than the false belief account does. It does this by certifying scenarios like the busy deceiver and imperfect deceiver scenarios as skeptically effective, and by doing the same for some scenarios that cast doubt on the epistemic status of beliefs in necessary truths.

#### **4. Two Problems for the Skeptic**

Can the two skeptical arguments that we looked at in the first section be revised so that they no longer presuppose the false belief account, and are instead at least compatible with (even if they don't go so far as to presuppose) the ignorance account?

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the first, see Benaceraff (1973).

<sup>9</sup> Similarly the ignorance account, but not the false belief account, allows for effective skeptical scenarios that target cogito-like beliefs whose truth is guaranteed by the fact that they are held; for example, the belief that there are beliefs, my belief that I exist,

Recall that the skeptical closure argument presupposed the false belief account at

$$(3) K (h \supset \sim \text{biv}).$$

Let's replace biv in (3) with a scenario that is skeptically effective on the ignorance account, but not on the false belief account – for example, the imperfect deceiver scenario. Abbreviate that scenario as 'biv-id.' And suppose the targeted belief is your belief that there is a chair in your room. Abbreviate that believed proposition as 'c'.

This yields

$$(3^*) K (c \supset \sim \text{biv-id}).$$

The following argument shows that (3\*) is false. Since knowledge requires truth, (3\*) entails  $c \supset \sim \text{biv-id}$ ; but its contrapositive is  $\text{biv-id} \supset \sim c$ , which is false since (as we have seen) biv-id does not entail anything about whether there is a chair in your room.

The obvious way to revise (3\*) to fit with the fact that the biv-id scenario excludes knowledge that there is a chair in your room (but does not necessarily exclude truly believing that there is a chair in your room) is to replace c with  $Kc$  yielding:

$$(3^{**}) K (Kc \supset \sim \text{biv-id}).$$

But (3\*\*) cannot figure into a skeptical closure argument that targets your belief that there is a chair in your room. At best it can be used to target your belief that you know that there is a chair in your room, as captured in this argument:

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and perhaps my belief that I have a brain.

(1\*\*)  $[KKc \ \& \ K \ (Kc \supset \sim \text{biv-id})] \supset K\sim \text{biv-id}$ .

(2\*\*)  $\sim K\sim \text{biv-id}$ .

(3\*\*)  $\underline{K \ (Kc \supset \sim \text{biv-id})}$ .

(4\*\*)  $\sim KKc$ .

So in the move from the original skeptical closure argument and the false belief account to a skeptical closure argument that incorporates the ignorance account, we end up with an argument that can at best show that you fail to know that you know.

Something similar happens when we sever the underdetermination argument from the false belief account, and try to make the underdetermination argument compatible with the ignorance account. Recall that the underdetermination argument presupposed the false belief account in the notion of a competing hypothesis at (5):

(5) If  $e$  is just as well explained by  $\text{biv}$  as it is by  $h$ , then  $\sim Kh$ .

Let's again replace  $\text{biv}$  with  $\text{biv-id}$ , and let's again replace your belief that you have hands with your belief that there is a chair in your room. Notice though that in doing this, we cannot pit  $\text{biv-id}$  against the hypothesis on which there is a chair in your room, since these hypotheses need not disagree. To get competing hypotheses, the  $\text{biv-id}$  hypothesis has to be pitted against a hypothesis in which you have the needed warrant to know that there is a chair in your room. Call that hypothesis Warrant for Chair Belief, or  $\text{wcb}$ . The result is this argument:

(5\*) If  $e$  is just as well explained by  $\text{biv-id}$  as it is by  $\text{wcb}$ , then  $\sim K\text{wcb}$ .

(6\*)  $e$  is just as well explained by  $\text{biv-id}$  as it is by  $\text{wcb}$ .

(7\*)  $\sim K\text{wcb}$ .

This argument can at best show that you do not know that you know.

We have arrived at two arguments that are far less formidable than the two arguments they supplanted, since they can at best only establish skepticism about second-order knowledge. This is far less worrying than skepticism about first-order knowledge, since most of the knowledge that we take ourselves to have is first-order knowledge – knowledge, that is, about something other than our own epistemic situation. Moreover, the prospects are poor for arguing from skepticism about second-order knowledge to skepticism about first-order knowledge. The most obvious way to make this move deploys the KK principle, which says that one knows *p* only if one knows that one knows *p*. But the consensus view is that this principle is false. If the consensus view is correct – and here I will simply assume that it is – then the revised closure and under-determination arguments, even if sound, will not help the skeptic get the broad conclusion that she wants.<sup>10</sup> We have arrived at a serious problem for the move to the ignorance account: that move severely weakens two of the most powerful arguments in the skeptic's arsenal.

The move to the ignorance account creates a second problem for the skeptic.<sup>11</sup> The ignorance account directly implies the KK principle, and this makes the skeptic vulnerable to a simple *reductio ad absurdum* argument. This is important,

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<sup>10</sup> I will not support the rejection of the KK principle here. The considerations that bear on it are complicated and many. Especially important sources are Hintikka (1962), Feldman (1981), and Williamson (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Vogel (2004, 436) identifies this problem. Though his discussion is not framed in terms of what makes scenarios skeptically effective, he seems to endorse the false belief account. Unfortunately he makes no attempt to identify the merits of the ignorance account.

since it means that the skeptic cannot free herself from a commitment to the KK principle by simply not availing herself of closure or underdetermination arguments. The skeptic's direct commitment to the KK principle can be brought out as follows. First, skeptically effective scenarios are situations that a subject cannot rule out, where this implies (at least) that the subject does not know that he is not in such a situation. But this means that someone knows some claim only if they know that they are not in a situation in which they fail to know that claim. But since knowing that one is not in a situation in which one fails to know a claim is equivalent to knowing that one is in a situation in which one does know that claim, this is tantamount to imposing the KK principle.<sup>12</sup>

## **5. A Nearly Internal Refutation and the Underlying Conception of Knowledge**

The skeptic faces a dilemma. She can deploy the ignorance account of effective skeptical scenarios, but then be stuck with the KK principle and a severely limited form of skepticism that only targets higher-order beliefs. Or she can retreat to the false belief account of effective skeptical scenarios, but then be stuck with the liabilities that come with that account: a failure to explain the full range of effective scenarios, a loss on the parsimony score to the competing ignorance account, and an inability to cast doubt on alleged knowledge of necessary truths. This dilemma was

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<sup>12</sup>The skeptic might try to construe ruling out a situation in a weaker way so that it requires something weaker than knowing that a situation does not obtain – perhaps, it only requires having a justified belief that it does not obtain. Weakening the requirement in some such way will not help since analogs of some of the standard objections to the KK principle apply to the suggested JK principle and other weaker

assembled from reflections on three important weapons in the skeptic's arsenal: skeptical scenarios, skeptical closure arguments, and skeptical underdetermination arguments. This almost makes for an internal refutation of two brands of skepticism: the brand that recruits skeptical scenarios for use in skeptical closure arguments, and the brand that recruits skeptical scenarios for use in skeptical underdetermination arguments.

This is almost an internal refutation of these brands of skepticism because the claim that the KK principle is false figured into each of the two problems that I identified. If the KK principle is indeed false, both brands are successfully refuted. But the claim that the KK principle is false is not itself something that was drawn out of the skeptic's weapons.

For this to be, apart from the claim that the KK principle is false, an otherwise internal refutation, the conception of knowledge that we worked with must be shaped by no more than the three skeptical weapons. Is this so?

The conception of knowledge at work in the foregoing was not obviously constrained by any particular theory of knowledge. This is reflected in the fact that no specialized notions, like reliability, epistemic duties, or sensitivity, appeared. At a higher-level of abstraction, no broadly internalist or externalist assumptions appeared either. But of course, some constraints on the conception of knowledge were at work. For example, the first skeptical closure argument (that was covered in the first section) requires a conception of knowledge on which these three things are true:

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principles that impose higher-level requirements.

knowledge is governed by closure; that whatever knowledge is, you don't know that you are not in any effective skeptical scenario in which your targeted belief would be false; and that whatever knowledge is, you do know that if the proposition that you believe is true, then you are not in such a skeptical scenario.<sup>13</sup>

Still one might wonder whether a familiar point nonetheless holds, namely: if upon closer analysis, the underlying conception of knowledge will turn out to be more loaded than it appears to be. More specifically, one might wonder whether that conception is an implausibly strong one; for example, because it is an infallibilist or strong internalist conception. But this familiar concern, even if true, is beside the point here. The claim that the skeptic is committed to an infallibilist or a strong internalist conception of knowledge did not show up anywhere in any of the central arguments of the third section. And this has an important consequence: if it should turn out that either brand of skepticism does not imply either an infallibilist or a strong internalist conception of knowledge, this will not affect the cogency of any of those central arguments.

The skeptic needs to reply to the two problems that I highlighted. Until the skeptic does this, it looks like the move from the false belief account to the ignorance

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, there are ways to disagree with one or more of these claims, for example by adopting a relevant alternatives theory, a sensitivity or safety theory, or some neo-Moorean view. But to argue against one of these brands of skepticism from one of these conceptions of knowledge is to mount what is very much an external challenge to the skeptic. I have tried to mount something much closer to an internal refutation.

account, a move that first appears to be to the skeptic's advantage since it certifies more scenarios as skeptically effective, ends up hobbling the skeptic.<sup>14</sup>

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