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## DISMISSING SKEPTICAL POSSIBILITIES

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Arguments can be given which purport to show that we have no knowledge of the external world, and this is both puzzling and disturbing. Such skeptical arguments turn on the possibility that we may be the victims of some form of massive sensory deception. If, however, it is legitimate to reject such a possibility out of hand, the threat of skepticism dissolves. My purpose here is to examine this dismissive response to skepticism, and to say why I think it is inadequate.

### 1. A CHARACTERIZATION OF THE DISMISSIVE RESPONSE

I see skepticism about the external world as a problem of underdetermination of theory by data. The data are facts about our sensory experience, and the problem is that the occurrence of this experience can, in principle, be explained in various different ways. According to the commonsense explanation, our experiences are caused by ordinary objects, whose existence we normally take for granted. But, as the skeptic points out, it is possible that one's experience is caused by something very different, say by an evil demon. Such a possibility represents an alternative to the commonsense account. Given the evidence we have, i.e., the facts about the character of our experiences, what makes one of these explanations more acceptable than the other?<sup>1</sup>

In response to this challenge, one might try to show that skeptical hypotheses are epistemically defective in the same way that some non-skeptical hypothesis might be. That is, there are certain mechanisms of justification which have a role to play when skepticism is not at issue; these would include enumerative induction and, more controversially, various forms of inference to the best explanation. So, one might try to show that some such mechanism licenses our preference for the commonsense account over skeptical hypotheses. The dismissive response

to skepticism would bypass any such procedure. On this view, we are entitled to reject skeptical hypotheses just because they are skeptical hypotheses; skeptical hypotheses are defective as such, in their own special way. Thus, it would be neither necessary nor possible to identify any general grounds for rejecting such hypotheses in favor of our commonsense beliefs. Our warrant for rejecting skeptical hypotheses is *sui generis*.<sup>2</sup>

This second sort of response to skepticism has been attractive to many philosophers. Let me cite three recent examples. John Pollock puts forward the following epistemic principle:

X's looking red to S is a *prima facie* reason for S to believe that x is red [and similarly for other features — JV].<sup>3</sup>

This principle would make any hypothesis that things are not as they appear (*prima facie*) worthy of rejection. Skeptical hypotheses are hypotheses that things in general are not as they appear to be. So, for Pollock, skeptical possibilities are defective as such, and may be dismissed. In somewhat the same vein, Roderick Chisholm writes:

The fact that we are appeared to in certain ways tends to make it evident that there is an external thing that is appearing to us in those ways. And the fact that we take there to be a tree tends to make it evident for us that there is a tree that we perceive.<sup>4</sup>

And, finally, Stewart Cohen says:

While we may concede to the skeptic that we lack evidence against radical skeptical hypotheses, I do not think we should be willing to concede that it is not rational to deny these hypotheses . . . . We can view the denials of these hypotheses as intrinsically rational.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their differences, all these views reflect the notion that we have reason to reject skeptical hypotheses as such. There remains no need to show that our sensory evidence warrants the rejection of skeptical hypotheses according to general principles of epistemic justification.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to distinguish the dismissive response from others that may seem somewhat like it. For example, (i) A “particularist” in Chisholm’s sense might argue that, since we invariably regard ourselves as having justified beliefs about the external world, there must be epistemic principles that license those beliefs.<sup>7</sup> However, even if this

conclusion is correct, it does not establish that our justification is *sui generis*. (ii) Wittgenstein and his followers have maintained that skeptical possibilities do not raise genuine doubts, and hence cannot undercut our knowledge claims. To the extent that this response involves the application of some general account of what constitutes a genuine doubt, it goes beyond the blank dismissal of skeptical possibilities I am concerned with here. (iii) One might deploy a principle of methodological conservatism against skeptical hypotheses, claiming that there is a presumption in favor of the commonsense beliefs we already hold. Presumably, though, the scope of such conservatism is not limited to situations involving skeptical hypotheses, so once again our warrant for rejecting these would not be *sui generis*. (iv) Finally, philosophers as diverse as Descartes, Berkeley, Davidson, and Putnam have argued that it is logically inconsistent to suppose that we are victims of massive sensory error. If this is so, we are in a position to reject skeptical hypotheses as incoherent; to that extent, skeptical hypotheses would fail to provide any real competition for our commonsense beliefs. But certainly hypotheses of other sorts might be logically defective, and so in this case we would not need to depend upon any *special* grounds to reject skeptical hypotheses.

Thus, from the standpoint of the taxonomy I am using here, none of these approaches counts as a dismissive response to skepticism. Rather, (ii) through (iv) in particular attempt to specify some reason to reject skeptical hypotheses other than the mere fact that they *are* skeptical hypotheses. In this respect, (ii) through (iv) resemble the response to skepticism described earlier, which straightforwardly appeals to general inductive or explanatory considerations in defense of our commonsense beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. THE CONTENT OF THE DISMISSIVE RESPONSE

It is a delicate matter to formulate an appropriate response to skepticism along the lines we are considering. Take Pollock's proposal, quoted above. On this view, if *x* appears *F*, we have a *prima facie* or defeasible justification for the claim that *x* is *F*. Since '*x* is *F*' entails that you are not merely, e.g., a brain in a vat deceived into thinking falsely that *x* is

F, you also have at least *prima facie* justification for rejecting skeptical possibilities. As it stands, however, the proposal is too strong. For consider the following case:

Duke looks out before him and seems to see a rabbit hop by. Duke recalls that he earlier took a pill from one of the two bottles in his medicine chest, although he can't recall which one. He does remember that one bottle contains aspirin, while the other contains LSD. Let's pretend that LSD wouldn't affect Duke's memory, and that, had he taken it, his present experience would inevitably be hallucinatory (so the rabbit would be a delusion). Now, since it appears to Duke that what he sees is a rabbit, the principle gives him warrant for believing there is a rabbit before him. But if Duke is justified in believing that there is a rabbit before him, then he is justified in believing that he is not now merely hallucinating a rabbit. In turn, Duke may justifiably conclude that he took aspirin rather than LSD — despite the fact that his genuine evidence is really neutral on this point.

This unwelcome result suggests that the scope of the principle under consideration is too broad. It should serve to rule out only possibilities of global sensory error, not instances of local sensory aberration as in the case just described. If we make that adjustment, the anti-skeptical principle will be:

(ASEP) If faced with a choice between two or more hypotheses, only one of which is a global skeptical hypothesis, you are justified in rejecting the global skeptical hypothesis.<sup>9</sup>

A “global” skeptical hypothesis is to be understood as one which entails that all of one's sensory experience is unveridical.

At this point, however, Pollock might argue that the Aspirin-LSD case is not a genuine counterexample to his proposal, and that the retreat to (ASEP) is premature. Pollock would have us recognize two kinds of defeaters of reasons for a belief, *rebutting* and *undercutting* defeaters. Very roughly, where R is a reason for believing p, a rebutting defeater is a reason to believe not-p, while an undercutting defeater attacks the evidential connection between R and p (Pollock, *op. cit.*, pp. 38–39). I claimed that, on Pollock's account, Duke has warrant for the belief that what seems to him like a rabbit is a rabbit, which then improperly rebuts the possibility that he has taken LSD. But this result will be avoided if Duke's memory that he may have taken LSD *undercuts* his reason for thinking that what he now sees is indeed a rabbit. Then, of course, the claim that Duke is seeing a rabbit will no longer be available to warrant the conclusion that he has *not* taken LSD.<sup>10</sup>

Still, I think a principle like Pollock's faces a dilemma: either it has force against hypotheses that aren't fully global skeptical hypotheses, or it doesn't. Suppose the first horn is taken. The principle must not unacceptably tip the balance in cases like the Aspirin-LSD example. This result is ostensibly avoided because the presumption that perceptual beliefs are veridical holds only in the absence of defeaters for those beliefs (i.e., loosely, it applies only in circumstances that seem perfectly normal). However, under such conditions, worries about *local* perceptual failures can be dealt with by appeal to explanatory or inductive considerations. For example, imagine that all else is normal and you seem to see a rabbit. Your freedom from hallucination in the past gives you reason to believe that you are not hallucinating now. Inductive or explanatory considerations also count against other anomalies, such as the possibility that you have encountered a fake, mechanical rabbit.<sup>11</sup> But this is to say that the presumption that experience is veridical has bearing only against thoroughgoing skeptical hypotheses, and we have taken the dilemma's second horn. In other words, Pollock's proposal becomes roughly similar in strength to the reformulated principle (ASEP).

Yet, that weakened principle faces difficulties in turn. Consider another problem case:

For a while, Frank has coherent experiences as of a world like this one. Then he seems to wake up from the middle of a normal perceptual experience, to discover that he is a strange creature in a laboratory being experimented on by equally strange experimenters. Frank becomes acclimated to his new surroundings, but then he goes through yet other "waking-up" episodes, each one calling into question the veridical character of his previous experience.

It is not clear to me what Frank would be justified in believing under the conditions described. If he is entitled to regard his last "waking-up" episode as leading to veridical experience, he will be able to reject the possibility that *all* his experience is unveridical. Yet, given the overall incoherence of Frank's sensory history, it is by no means apparent that he ought to place any particular confidence in his present perceptions. That is, it may well be that Frank ought to withhold judgment between the hypothesis that his very latest perceptions are veridical and the hypothesis that absolutely none of them are. However, in this situation the modified anti-skeptical principle (ASEP) would direct Frank to

reject the hypothesis of total deception, improperly favoring the first conclusion over the second. So it seems that we would need to restrict the scope of the principle still further.

It is worth noting that this second case also counts against Pollock's original proposal. Although much about the case is unclear, it would not be reasonable under the circumstances for Frank to believe that *all* his experiences have been veridical. Pollock would presumably want to say that Frank's information about the discontinuities in his experience defeats this conclusion, which would otherwise follow from the general presumption that experience is veridical. But how is this so? Despite the discontinuities in Frank's experience, it is not logically impossible for that experience to be entirely veridical (Frank may live in a very strange world). Moreover, the discontinuities can't provide direct inductive reasons to think that some of Frank's experiences have been unveridical (at no point does he *observe* that his experiences have been unveridical, in conjunction with their discontinuity). So, it seems that, without the availability of some further belief or epistemic principle, Frank's recognition of the discontinuities in his experience would fail to defeat the presumption that things are as they appear to him. This means that there is nothing to keep Frank from justifiably concluding that all his experiences have been veridical.<sup>12</sup> In short, it seems that Pollock's machinery of defeaters is not sufficient, by itself, to ward off an unacceptable consequence of his anti-skeptical principle.

The results so far suggest that it will not be easy to formulate an anti-skeptical principle of the appropriate strength, and I have some doubts as to whether this task can ever be carried out.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, rather than pursue this point now, I would prefer to address the tenability of the dismissive response to skepticism more directly. We can therefore make do with (ASEP) as it stands, at least for the purpose of discussion.

One might well think that such a discussion is bound to be very limited. Those unsympathetic to the dismissive response will regard it as an evasion of, rather than a solution to, the problem skepticism poses. The skeptic complains that we *arbitrarily* choose the everyday picture of the world over hypotheses that involve massive sensory deception; if this is correct, skepticism seems to follow, since beliefs arrived at arbitrarily cannot count as knowledge. The response on offer is that our preference is, in fact, legitimately motivated by the anti-

skeptical epistemic principle. But from the opposing standpoint, this principle amounts to nothing more than a stipulation that our preference for the everyday view is non-arbitrary. Appeal to the principle is therefore empty, since merely to declare or to stipulate that a choice is well-motivated does not make it so.

A partisan of the dismissive response would protest that this criticism in fact presupposes the invalidity of the anti-skeptical principle, and thereby begs the question. Defenders of the principle will concede that it has not been *shown* to be valid, but they would deny that appeals to it are therefore illegitimate. After all, the validity of a basic principle cannot be legitimated by appeal to something more fundamental — justification comes to an end. We now seem to be faced with a dispute as to whether the burden of proof falls on those who uphold the anti-skeptical principle or those who do not. Such a dispute seems to promise little gain.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the tenability of the dismissive response can be approached in ways that avoid this kind of impasse. We will find that, in any event, the appeal to an anti-skeptical epistemic principle faces important methodological and substantive objections.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL CRITICISMS

One problem with the dismissive response is that it lacks a certain psychological plausibility. If the dismissive approach holds good, our situation is as follows: Skeptical hypotheses as such merit rejection straightaway. Presumably, we are aware that such hypotheses are intrinsically defective, and so we rationally and justifiably reject them when we recognize them as skeptical hypotheses. The trouble is that somehow the inferiority of such hypotheses can be lost on us, and skepticism can seem, at least temporarily, like a real threat. How this can possibly be so is obscure, if the principle that skeptical hypotheses should be rejected is really immediately to hand.

To some extent, all responses to skepticism face a similar difficulty. We require an account that provides at once for our justification in rejecting skeptical hypotheses, and for the fact that skeptical hypotheses can sometimes strike us as live competitors to our everyday beliefs. But it will be especially hard for the dismissive response to meet this demand. If the dismissive response is correct, the deficiencies of a

skeptical hypothesis should lie as close to the surface as those of a direct contradiction. Yet we never hesitate in rejecting a contradiction we recognize as such; why, then, does our reaction to skeptical hypotheses vary as it does?<sup>15</sup>

Now, of course, the proponent of the dismissive approach might introduce some further account of why and how we might lose sight of the fault in skeptical hypotheses, or of why our immediate warrant for rejecting those hypotheses could be insufficient in some contexts, leading us to hesitate.<sup>16</sup> Presumably, though, a principal attraction of the dismissive response to skepticism is that it is clear-cut and unencumbered by questionable philosophical machinery. It now seems that, in order to accommodate our various reactions to skeptical possibilities, the dismissive response has to be extended in ways that are not clear-cut and unencumbered. By itself, the dismissive response does not do justice to the complex texture of the problem to which it is addressed.

The dismissive response proves to be disappointing in another respect. A fully satisfactory answer to skepticism will do more than to offer a bare defense of the claim that we have knowledge of the external world. At least ideally, it will also provide an explanation of how we are able to know things about the world despite the possibilities the skeptic raises. The dismissive response attempts to meet both these demands by recourse to an anti-skeptical epistemic principle. This principle supposedly licenses our rejection of skeptical possibilities in the first place. At the same time, it is called upon to explain *why* our rejection of those possibilities is justified: we are justified in rejecting skeptical possibilities because doing so is mandated by the principle in question.

Like any other explanation, an account of why we are justified in rejecting skeptical hypotheses must meet various adequacy conditions. One constraint of this kind is that an explanation must not be *ad hoc*, i.e., the explanans must not be too closely linked with the explanandum. In the extreme, the distance between explanans and explanandum reduces to nothing, and the phenomenon in question is given no explanation at all. Rather, it is treated as a brute fact. Now, suppose you dismiss skeptical hypotheses in accordance with the anti-skeptical principle. We have to say that it is legitimate for you to reject skeptical hypotheses *because* it is legitimate for you to reject skeptical hy-



potheses (that is the import of the principle). The epistemic deficiency of these hypotheses is, in effect, put forward as a brute fact not susceptible of analysis or explication.

One might object that it is unreasonable to demand an explanation here. For example, we regard contradictions as intrinsically unsuitable for rational acceptance, and the summary rejection of contradictions poses no mysteries. Moreover, according to some foundationalist views, we have various beliefs whose justification is immediate. There will, then, be some epistemic principle or principles that accord positive epistemic status directly to those basic beliefs. Why should the demand for explanatory adequacy count against the dismissive response if it would not carry any weight in these other cases?

I think that, in fact, this rejoinder distorts how contradictions and basic beliefs (if such there be) function in someone's epistemic economy. I take it that contradictions are unacceptable *because* they couldn't possibly be true, and true belief is the object (perhaps among other things) of cognitive activity. Basic beliefs, too, are supposed to enjoy their epistemic privilege in virtue of some relevant characteristics they have (i.e., *because* they are certain, indubitable, incorrigible, or something of the sort).<sup>17</sup> Still, I do not want to deny in principle that there can be brute epistemic facts, as the dismissive response presupposes. My point is rather that the proliferation of such facts is to be avoided in systematic epistemology, as it is elsewhere. To the extent that the dismissive response to skepticism forecloses the possibility of certain explanations by positing primitive epistemic facts, it carries a cost. A treatment of skepticism that can do without such posits is, to that degree, superior.<sup>18</sup>

The explanatory weakness of the anti-skeptical principle lies in its failure to integrate the rejection of skeptical hypotheses into our wider epistemic practices and procedures. Similar considerations call into question the extent to which a direct dismissal of skeptical possibilities could be justified in the first place. The claim that such justification derives from a special, independent anti-skeptical epistemic principle brings on or intensifies a "scatter" problem.<sup>19</sup> In our ordinary doings, we legitimately reject hypotheses as, *inter alia*, unduly complex, *ad hoc*, or as simply not supported by the data. Various properties — complexity, being *ad hoc*, being unsupported by the data — are thus taken

to have something in common, namely that they are bases of epistemic disconfirmation. However, the positing of additional, widely disparate grounds for rejecting hypotheses makes it more difficult to see them all as aspects of one single thing. In particular, to say that we have justification for rejecting skeptical hypotheses as such strains our capacity to recognize what is being claimed *as* epistemic justification.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. FITTING THE EVIDENCE

The criticisms raised so far suggest that the dismissive response works poorly or inadequately. There are also reasons to doubt whether the dismissive response really succeeds at all. In other words, it is arguable that our rejection of skeptical hypotheses cannot, in general, be licensed by an anti-skeptical epistemic principle.

First, some background. As I mentioned earlier, the alternative to the dismissive approach would be to identify some general or “topic-neutral” grounds for rejecting the possibility of massive sensory deception. One straightforward way to accomplish this would be to show how sensory evidence warrants, by some accepted inductive procedure, our favoring the commonsense view of the world over its skeptical competitors. The dismissive response, however, eschews such an undertaking. On this latter view, we properly reject skeptical possibilities because they are skeptical possibilities, and not because they fit the evidence more poorly than their competitors.

These two approaches to skepticism are mutually exclusive in an important way. For, suppose that there are good inductive or explanatory grounds for preferring the commonsense view to skeptical hypotheses. There would be no work for an anti-skeptical epistemic principle to do, and the dismissive response to skepticism would be unnecessary.<sup>21</sup> Recourse to the dismissive response therefore presupposes that skeptical and commonsense competitors stand on an equal footing inductively. The anti-skeptical principle is then needed to serve as a tie-breaker.

This construal of the situation leads to trouble for the dismissive approach. To see the difficulty, consider how we deal with the underdetermination of theory by data in an ordinary context, such as the attribution of an art work. There is a scholarly dispute as to whether the

Ghent Altarpiece was the work of both Jan van Eyck and his brother Hubert, or whether it is due to Jan van Eyck alone. The available evidence is somewhat equivocal. The altarpiece bears an inscription ascribing it to both artists, although the authenticity of the inscription has been questioned. Oddly, no other works can be confidently attributed to Hubert van Eyck, and the paucity of documentary evidence about his life suggests that his existence may be no more than a legend. Stylistic considerations are thought by some to indicate that Jan van Eyck alone is responsible for the work, although others see signs of another artist's contribution in the central panel. Let us assume that, on balance, the evidence supports attributing the Ghent Altarpiece solely to Jan van Eyck. In other words, we will suppose that the hypothesis of a single painter gives a marginally better explanation of the historical and stylistic data than the hypothesis of two painters does. Yet, the two-painter explanation is by no means implausible or without explanatory virtues of its own.<sup>22</sup>

Let us now imagine that an art historian, Sam, is inspecting the altarpiece. Sam is to choose between two hypotheses as to the cause of his sensory experience: (a) the cause of his experience is a work by one painter, Jan van Eyck, or (b) the cause of his experience is a work by two painters, Jan and Hubert. At this point, let us introduce some skeptical possibility as well, say the possibility that (c) Sam is a thoroughly deceived brain in a vat given sensory inputs as of a particular painting. There is a real difficulty in seeing how an anti-skeptical epistemic principle is meant to operate in such a context. We suppose that Sam reasonably believes that the source of his visual experience is (a) a painting by Jan van Eyck, not (c) some nefarious computer. But if Sam's choice between (a) and (c) is governed by the anti-skeptical principle, it must be the case that those hypotheses are equal in inductive merit; the anti-skeptical principle is supposedly needed to break the tie between them. But if the skeptical story (c) is equal in inductive merit to the one-painter hypothesis (a), and the one-painter hypothesis (a) is *superior* to the two-painter hypothesis (b), then it must be that the skeptical story (c) is also superior in inductive merit to the two-painter hypothesis (b). In other words, it is more reasonable on explanatory grounds for Sam to believe that he is a brain in a vat than it is for him to believe that the Ghent Altarpiece was painted by two

people instead of one! This is a substantive and implausible claim. Where do the inductive or explanatory advantages of the skeptical story lie? An attribution of the painting to two artists might ultimately be unwarranted, but such a conclusion hardly seems to be *worse* by general inductive standards than the claim that one is a brain in a vat.

This difficulty arises because non-skeptical hypotheses of varying inductive strength may fit a given body of sensory evidence. A given body of evidence might also support, to one degree or another, different skeptical hypotheses. This possibility, too, creates a problem for the dismissive approach. Presumably, you would legitimately maintain your commonsense beliefs against any skeptical alternative whatever, regardless of how it is filled out. These various skeptical hypotheses will differ in their inductive or explanatory merit. (One can easily generate one skeptical hypothesis from another by adding some gratuitous explanatory machinery to the original; the new hypothesis will be less simple than the old one.) Once again, it cannot be that the preferability of our commonsense beliefs is, in general, secured by the anti-skeptical epistemic principle. For, the principle is supposed to apply when a commonsense hypothesis and its skeptical competitor are equal in inductive merit. If the principle applied to *all* choices between your commonsense beliefs and skeptical hypotheses, all skeptical hypotheses would have to equal your commonsense beliefs in inductive strength. In turn, the skeptical hypotheses would have to be equal in inductive strength to one another, which is not the case.

The trouble in both instances, I think, is that the anti-skeptical principle is too blunt an instrument for its purpose. Since it does not take into account the details of how skeptical and non-skeptical hypotheses fit the sensory data, the principle cannot be properly sensitive to differences in inductive merit among those hypotheses. It is worth noting that an alternative approach to skepticism might well fare better in this regard. Consider the first case. Suppose you succeed in showing that your commonsense beliefs provide better explanations of the sensory facts than skeptical hypotheses do (where this judgment is made according to general, recognized standards of explanatory adequacy). It is consistent with this outcome that there be several non-skeptical hypotheses, varying in inductive strength, all of which have more inductive merit than a given skeptical hypothesis. In particular,

both the one-painter and two-painter attributions could be (components of) non-skeptical hypotheses, each of which is better than the given skeptical alternative. Concerning the second case, it could be that your commonsense beliefs enjoy greater inductive support than *any* skeptical competitor they face. This could be true even though the skeptical hypotheses themselves differ in their level of inductive merit. Thus, a response to skepticism relying on general principles of non-demonstrative inference may well avoid difficulties facing the dismissive approach.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The dismissive response to skepticism is attractive because it apparently exhibits a healthy respect for common sense, and because it seems to deliver immediately a decisive result. I have tried to show, however, that this approach is in fact beset by unclarity and serious deficiencies. It seems to me that, in arriving at a better answer to skeptical challenges, we are bound to learn some important lessons about ourselves and our place in the world. So, perhaps the greatest drawback to adopting the dismissive approach is that we thereby forego the illumination and satisfaction that a more adequate reply to skepticism might afford.<sup>23</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One might immediately object that skepticism so formulated presupposes a foundationalist account of our knowledge of the external world, and that such an account is itself unacceptable. See Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977). I will not enter into this issue here.

<sup>2</sup> Two points of clarification: First, when I say that a belief has warrant I mean that it is justified in some way; warrant is not the same thing as evidence, which I take to be a body of beliefs on which some belief is based and from which it derives its justification. Using this terminology, one can properly say that a belief has warrant even if it is not justified by evidence. Second, the claim that our warrant for rejecting skeptical hypotheses is *sui generis* is essential to, but does not exhaust, the dismissive response which is my concern. This position specifies in addition that the dismissal of skeptical hypotheses is warranted by their being skeptical hypotheses. To say that the warrant is *sui generis* leaves open the possibility that some other feature, which only such hypotheses have, warrants their rejection.

<sup>3</sup> John Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Stewart Cohen, "How to Be a Fallibilist" in *Philosophical Perspectives 2*, Epistemology, ed. J. Tomberlin (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1988), p. 112.

<sup>6</sup> I should forestall a terminological problem. It might seem that Pollock and Chisholm could allow for skeptical and non-skeptical hypotheses to be defective in the same way, i.e., by making things out to be other than they appear to be. Hence, neither Pollock nor Chisholm counts as an advocate of the dismissive response as I have described it. The difficulty vanishes if one classifies as a skeptical hypothesis any suggestion that things are not as they appear to be. (See for example Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators", *Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1970), p. 1015.) In any event, as I argue in the next section, a proposal like Chisholm's or Pollock's will be overly strong, unless its range of application is restricted to global failures of veridical perception (i.e., unless it applies only to *global* skeptical hypotheses).

<sup>7</sup> Chisholm writes: "We begin as 'particularists': we identify *instances* of knowing without applying any *criteria* of knowing or of justification" *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> For a version of the explanation-based approach, see my "Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation" *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), and for a treatment of (iii), see my "Sklar On Methodological Conservatism", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52 (1992). I plan to discuss the other approaches at length in future work.

<sup>9</sup> As it stands, this principle is too weak, since it does not cover cases where more than one skeptical alternative is advanced. Tinkering with the formulation might avoid this difficulty. But as I argue below, the principle is also too strong, so strengthening it so as to handle more than one skeptical hypothesis at a time would be unavailing. I am indebted here to a careful reader for *Philosophical Studies*.

<sup>10</sup> I do not see why, though, "There is a rabbit before me" does not itself work as a *rebutting* defeater of the supposed undercutter. (Pollock, *op. cit.*, pp. 38–39).

<sup>11</sup> I take it that Pollock would not agree; see Pollock, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–44.

<sup>12</sup> What I have said calls into question whether the discontinuities can serve as a rebutting defeater, but similar considerations also count against their working as an undercutting defeater. Suppose the discontinuities were to undercut Frank's belief that he has undergone various remarkable transformations, and that all things have been as they have appeared. According to Pollock, the discontinuities would then have to *support* or *confirm* the claim that Frank's experience might be unveridical (i.e., that things might be appearing as they do without really being that way). I don't see how they would do this, in the absence of additional principles or assumptions.

<sup>13</sup> One further possibility would be to treat (ASEP) as providing only *prima facie* justification for rejecting global skeptical hypotheses, so that the discontinuities described in the second example would defeat the initial presumption against skeptical hypotheses. Hence, (ASEP) would not have the improper result in the second case that Frank is justified in rejecting the hypothesis that all his experience is unveridical. The discussion of the previous paragraph indicates why (ASEP) could not be saved in this way; in themselves, the discontinuities in Frank's experience do not count as defeaters. I am indebted here to Stewart Cohen. In Section 4, I will argue that the anti-skeptical principle inevitably misfires because it fails to take into account the evidential relations between facts about one's experience and conclusions concerning the external world. This means, in effect, that the principle cannot be calibrated finely enough to yield acceptable results in all cases — i.e., it cannot be given a formulation of the proper strength.

<sup>14</sup> I am using the fiction of a debate between a skeptic and an anti-skeptic as an expository convenience. The point is really that such considerations would not be of use to someone trying to decide whether the dismissive response is satisfactory.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the comparison of contradictions and skeptical hypotheses, see below. Given what I say there, our response to skeptical hypotheses should be *at least* as firm as our response to contradictions. It might be objected that the criticism just made incorrectly equates the epistemically immediate with the psychologically immediate, i.e., with what is obvious and very readily grasped. But in other cases, such as our treatment of contradictions, psychological availability does follow epistemic immediacy. A view that would divorce the two where the anti-skeptical principle is concerned will thus be led into explanatory complications and commitments which it is desirable to avoid.

<sup>16</sup> It seems to me that one merit of Stewart Cohen's work is that he faces this issue directly. Cohen suggests, roughly, that standards of epistemic appraisal can shift from everyday situations to philosophical ones. The immediate warrant we have for rejecting skeptical hypotheses is supposed to suffice for the former but not the latter. See Cohen, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 106–111. Still, I believe that Cohen's position is subject to the other difficulties I raise.

<sup>17</sup> Alvin Plantinga notes the difficulty in specifying what gives basic beliefs their privileged status, and argues that there is thus no objection to including among the basic beliefs things like 'I am aware of the divine presence'. See Plantinga, "Is Belief In God Properly Basic?" *Nous* 15 (1981), pp. 41–51. However, one may view Plantinga's maneuver as illustrating the problems implicit in meeting skeptical challenges with claims about the intrinsic rationality of particular beliefs. On this point, see Richard Fumerton, "Metaepistemology and Skepticism" in *Doubting: Contemporary Perspectives on Skepticism*, ed. M. Roth and G. Ross (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the preferability of simple over complex explanations is a brute epistemic fact. If so, doesn't an argument that we can accept the commonsense account as simpler than skeptical alternatives traffic in brute facts just as much as the dismissive response? Not really. For friends of inference to the best explanation, the superiority of simpler hypotheses is a feature of scientific practice that we have to deal with in any case. If we are thereby forced to countenance a primitive epistemic fact, this does not give us a reason to posit such facts with abandon.

<sup>19</sup> See Ernest Sosa, "Theories of justification: old doctrines newly defended" in his *Knowledge in perspective: Selected essays in epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 128. I am indebted here to Richard Feldman. That an anti-skeptical principle could simply be added to our other canons of justification is contemplated by Wittgenstein. See *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright and trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), # 634 (p. 84).

<sup>20</sup> One might think that the inclusion of inference to the best explanation among the methods of inductive justification already creates a "scatter" problem which the anti-skeptical principle would not greatly exacerbate. But this is not obviously the case. Gilbert Harman has argued that induction generally is best understood as inference to the best explanation ("Inference to the Best Explanation", *Philosophical Review* 74 (1968), pp. 88–95), and Michael Friedman has claimed that explanation is in a certain sense a way of unifying the explananda ("Explanation and Scientific Understanding", *Journal of Philosophy* 71 (1974), pp. 5–19). While these views are controversial, they at least suggest that simplicity and unity are central epistemic virtues, and that an independent anti-skeptical principle would be a departure from what we otherwise understand to be the sources of epistemic justification.

<sup>21</sup> I mean to include explanatory value among the sources of inductive strength or merit. One might maintain, contrary to what I have just claimed, that the dismissive response supplies a warrant different in kind from that supplied by standard inductive procedures — and that for some reason a satisfactory answer to skepticism requires that we possess some such non-standard warrant. I will not argue against this thesis here.

<sup>22</sup> For conflicting views about the authorship of the Ghent Altarpiece, see among others Maurice Brockwell, *The Van Eyck Problem* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1971) and Elisabeth Dhanens, *Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973).

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