

Can We Reason Our Way Out of Skepticism?

Part 2: Is Skepticism Self-
Refuting?

Is Skepticism Self-Refuting?

- ◉ Consider the claim:
- ◉ C: “I know that no one knows anything.”

Is Skepticism Self-Refuting?

- Consider the claim:
- *C*: “I know that no one knows anything.”
- *C* is self-contradictory: if it were true, then is at least one proposition that someone knows, *namely, that no one knows anything*. But then *C* is false!

Avoiding Self-Refutation?

- ◉ Distinguish between:
- ◉ C: “I know that no one knows anything.”
- ◉ C*: “No one knows anything.”

Avoiding Self-Refutation?

- ◉ Distinguish between:
- ◉ C : “I know that no one knows anything.”
- ◉ C^* : “No one knows anything.”
- ◉ Suppose the skeptic just claims C^* , not C . Does this enable them to avoid the charge of self-refutation?

Is this too easy?

- *Skeptic*: “No one knows anything.”
- *You*: “OK. Is that something you know?”
- *Skeptic*: “Of course not! I just told you no one knows anything.”

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- Some people think there is something irrational about the skeptic’s response here.

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- *You*: “OK. Is that something you know?”
- *Skeptic*: “Of course not! I just told you no one knows anything.”
- Some people think there is something irrational about the skeptic’s response here.
 - **Question:** Do you agree? If so, what exactly makes it irrational?

One Diagnosis

- It seems the skeptic who endorses C^* s committed to saying things like the following:
- ? “No one knows anything, but I don’t know that.”

One Diagnosis

- It seems the skeptic who endorses C^* is committed to saying things like the following:
- ? “No one knows anything, but I don’t know that.”
- There seems something absurd about making this assertion.

Moore's Paradox

- ? “It’s raining, but I don’t know it’s raining.”
- ? “Dogs bark, but I don’t know that dogs bark.”
- G.E. Moore observed that these utterances are logically consistent, but nonetheless seem to be absurd.

Moore's Paradox

- **Fred:** “It’s raining, but I don’t know it’s raining.”



It could be true that both (i) it's raining outside, (ii) Fred doesn't know this.

Moore's Paradox

- One diagnosis: In asserting p , you represent yourself as knowing p .
 - Unger (1975); Williamson (2000)

Moore's Paradox

- ? “It’s raining, but I don’t know it’s raining.”
- In uttering the first part of the sentence, you represent yourself as knowing that it’s raining. But the second part of the sentence goes on to deny this.

Moore's Paradox

- ? “No one knows anything, but I don't know that.”
- Similarly, in uttering the first part of the sentence, the skeptic represents themselves as knowing no one knows anything. But the second part of the sentence goes on to deny this.

But so what?

- But does this really show that skepticism is self-refuting?
- At most it seems to show that there is something misleading about asserting skepticism; in the very act of making the assertion, you represent yourself as possessing knowledge that your assertion itself disavows.

But so what?

- But for all that skepticism might still be true!

But so what?

- **Fred:** “It’s raining, but I don’t know it’s raining.”



- Even if it’s irrational for Fred to assert this, what he says might still be true!

Universal skepticism vs. circumscribed skepticism

- Another potential challenge for the self-refutation objection:
- The objection only seems to target *universal skepticism*: the view that no one can know anything at all.

Universal skepticism vs. circumscribed skepticism

- But we can also imagine a more circumscribed skeptic, who only says that no one can know anything about some specific topic *T*.

Universal skepticism vs. circumscribed skepticism

- *External world skeptic:* Denies that we can know anything about the external world (e.g., that I have a body, that rocks and tables and laptops exist, etc.).

Universal skepticism vs. circumscribed skepticism

- *External world skeptic:* Denies that we can know anything about the external world (e.g., that I have a body, that rocks and tables and laptops exist, etc.).
- This leaves open the possibility that we know lots of other stuff – including that external world skepticism is true!

Universal skepticism vs. circumscribed skepticism

- ◉ *Ext. World Skeptic:* “No one knows anything about the external world.”
- ◉ *You:* “OK. Is that something you know?”
- ◉ *Ext. World Skeptic:* “Yes! After all, I gave you an argument for that conclusion. Remember all that stuff about demons and BIVs? ”

Universal skepticism vs. circumscribed skepticism

- ◉ *But is circumscribed skepticism really a stable position?*

Rinard's Argument Against the Skeptic

- Argues that skepticism about the external world spills over into skepticism about the past, which spills over into skepticism about complex reasoning.
- She then argues that skepticism about complex reasoning commits the skeptic to an irrational combination of beliefs.

Rinard's Argument Against the Skeptic

- As a result, skepticism is self-undermining, since the skeptic's own reasoning leads them into an irrational position.

Preliminaries

- Note: Rinard is primarily focused on skepticism about *justification*, rather than knowledge.

Preliminaries

External World Knowledge Skepticism:

No one knows anything about the external world.

- i.e., you can't know O is true
- You also can't know that you have hands, or that you're sitting in front of a computer right now.

Preliminaries

External World Justification Skepticism:
No one is justified in believing anything about the external world.

- i.e., no one is justified in believing O is true
- No one is justified in believing that they have hands, or that they are sitting in front of a laptop

An Argument for External World Justification Skepticism

- ◉ P1) You have no way of ruling out *S*.
- ◉ P2) If you have no way of ruling out *S*, then you are not **justified in believing** that *O* is true.
- ◉ Ccl) You are not **justified in believing** *O* is true.

Preliminaries

- ◉ Arguably, justification skepticism is the more radical and disconcerting view, since it seems to entail that all of our beliefs about the external world are irrational

(assuming justification = rationality)

Comparison with Russell

- For example, one way of interpreting Russell's view is that no one knows anything about the external world, but we are still justified in believing that the external world exists, based on IBE

Preliminaries

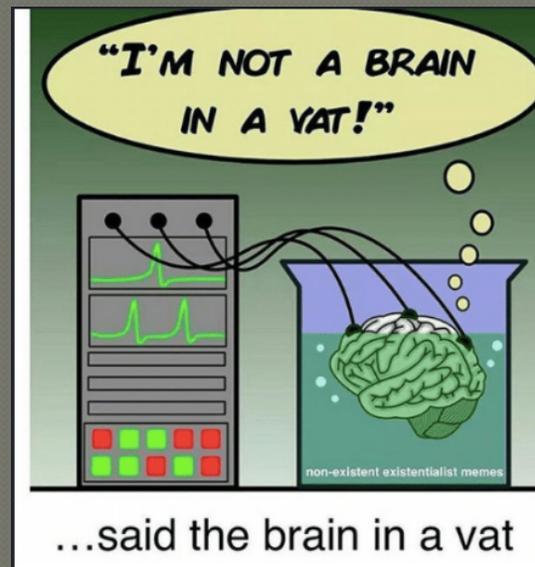
- **A Question to Consider:** Does Rinard's argument also work equally well against external world knowledge skepticism?

Rinard's Argument: First Step

- First, Rinard argues that if you are an external world justification skeptic, you should also be a justification skeptic about the *past*.
- i.e., You should hold that we are not justified in believing any propositions about the past.

Momentary Brain in a Vat

- As before, you are a brain in a vat (BIV). But, due to budgetary constraints, the scientists can only maintain your brain for a single minute. To simulate authentic human experience, they have implanted your brain with tons of false apparent memories.



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- Rinard claims that just as all of our experiences are compatible with the original BIV hypothesis, we all of our experiences are also compatible with the Momentary BIV hypothesis.

Comparison with Russell

- There is no logical impossibility in the hypothesis that the world sprang into existence five minutes ago, exactly as it then was, with a population that "remembered" a wholly unreal past.
- - Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind*

An Argument for Justification Skepticism About the Past

- ◉ P1) You have no way of ruling out the Momentary BIV hypothesis.
- ◉ P2) If you have no way of ruling out the Momentary BIV hypothesis, then you are not justified in believing anything about the past.
- ◉ Cc1) You are not justified in believing anything about the past.

Rinard's Argument: First Step

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

Rinard's Argument: Second Step

- The second step in Rinard's argument is to argue that if you are justification skeptic about the past, you should also be a justification skeptic about complex reasoning – that is, reasoning that involves multiple steps that cannot be held in one's head all at once.

Complex Reasoning

- Complex reasoning is very common in logic, math, and philosophy.
- Think e.g., of the proof of the Pythagorean theorem, or some other proof you encountered in geometry.

Complex Reasoning: An Example

- 1) Alice will speak at the conference.
- 2) If Alice will speak at the conference, then George will not speak at the conference.
- Lemma 1) George will not speak at the conference. (from 1, 2)
- 3) If George will not speak at the conference, then either Ari or Devon will attend the conference.
- Lemma 2) Either Ari or Devon will attend the conference. (from Lemma, 3)
- 4) Ari will not attend the conference.
- Ccl) Devon will attend the conference. (from Lemma 2, 4)

Complex Reasoning

- Since in complex reasoning, you cannot keep all the steps of the argument in your head at once, you need to trust your memory that you arrived at the earlier steps using a good argument.

Complex Reasoning

- For example, suppose you have an argument of the form:
 - Premise 1
 - Premise 2
 - Lemma 1 (from 1, 2)
 - Premise 3
 - Lemma 2 (from 1, 2)
 - Premise 4
 - Ccl
- In deriving the conclusion, you need to trust your earlier memory of having arrived at Lemma 2) using a sound argument.

Complex Reasoning

- Rinard claims that a consequence of this is that if you are not justified in believing that you arrived at the lemma (/earlier steps of the argument) using a good argument, then you have no justification for drawing the conclusion.

Example

Premise 1

Premise 2

Lemma 1 (from 1, 2)

Premise 3

Lemma 2 (from 1, 2)

Premise 4

Ccl

- For example, suppose that at the time you are drawing the conclusion, you are told you had earlier taken a drug that distorts your memory. It seems you would no longer be justified in relying on your memory of having arrived at e.g., Lemma 2 using a good argument, and hence no longer justified in drawing the conclusion.

Rinard's Argument: Second Step

- But if we are not justified in believing anything about the past, then we are never justified in trusting our apparent memories of having arrived at an earlier lemma/step in the argument in a sound fashion.

Rinard's Argument: Second Step

- So, Rinard argues:
- **Claim II:** If it's rational to accept the skepticism about the past, then it's rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

Rinard's Argument: Final Step

- **Claim I:** If it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is rational to accept skepticism about the past.
- **Claim II:** If it's rational to accept skepticism about the past, then it's rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.
- **Subconclusion:** If it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is rational to accept skepticism about complex reasoning. (from Claims I & II)

Rinard's Argument: Final Step

- Now, Rinard argues, suppose one were to accept skepticism about complex reasoning on the basis of this argument.
- But this argument is itself a form of complex reasoning!
- So you are holding a belief that, by your own lights, it is not rational to accept.

Rinard's Argument: Final Step

- That is, you are committed to hold a belief of the form:
 - p & it's not rational for me to believe p .
- Where p = skepticism about complex reasoning.

Rinard's Argument: Final Step

- That is, you are committed to hold a belief of the form:
 - p & it's not rational for me to believe p .
- But, Rinard argues, *this* is irrational – it is irrational to hold a belief that, by your own lights, is irrational.

Rinard's Argument: Final Step

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

Putting the Pieces Together

- **Subconclusion:** If it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is rational to accept skepticism about complex reasoning. (from Claims I & II)
- **Claim III:** It is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to complex reasoning skepticism.
- **Ccl:** It is not rational to accept external world skepticism. (from Subconclusion & Claim III)

Questions to Think About

- Rinard's conclusion is that it is irrational to *believe* skepticism about the external world. But does this show that that skepticism is *false*?

Questions to Think About

- Rinard's conclusion is that it is irrational to *believe* skepticism about the external world. But does this show that that skepticism is *false*?
- Compare: We saw earlier that it is irrational to assert, "*p* & I don't know *p*." But still such assertions can nonetheless be *true*.

Questions to Think About

- ◉ Indeed, one might worry that we are left with an even worse skeptical conclusion:
- ◉ Skepticism is true, but it's also irrational for us to believe that it is true!

Questions to Think About

- ◉ Indeed, one might worry that we are left with an even worse skeptical conclusion:
- ◉ Skepticism is true, but it's also irrational for us to believe that it is true!
- ◉ Is this a fair criticism? Is there any way for Rinard to respond to this worry?

Discussion Group Questions

- 1) Do you agree with Rinard's argument that skepticism about the external world commits the skeptic to irrational beliefs? If so, is this a good reason to think that skepticism is false?
- 2) Are there any other reasons to think skepticism is self-refuting, other than those covered in this lecture? If "yes", explain what you think those reasons are.