

The Skeptic and the Obvious Proof-Theoretic Fact

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1. Introduction

Given the long history of external world skepticism, it would be fairly surprising if someone managed to come up with a simple new resolution. However, that is what I propose to do in this paper. Following Augustin Rey, let us distinguish two tasks: skeptic convincing and skeptic blocking. A skeptic-convincing argument, must convince the skeptic that we do know the external world exists. In contrast, a skeptic-blocking argument, must block or refute the skeptic's argument that we don't know that the external world exists. I claim that attention to an obvious proof theoretic fact, plus some a non-obvious but fundamental fact about epistemic normativity, generates a successful skeptic-blocking argument.

The refutation attempts to block the skeptical argument by showing that (despite first appearances) we have no reason to believe his premise D: 'I don't know that I am not dreaming'. The key idea, will be that the appeal of the skeptic's argument depends on an intuition about epistemic normativity (we can't be justified in taking it for granted ~BIV because that there is some possible set of belief forming methods from which ~BIV cannot be established) which only feels attractive insofar as we are tempted to falsely suppose that there's a contrast class of indubitable claims which "could" be established from all possible belief forming methods. Reminding ourselves of the latter fact - what I will call the obvious proof theoretic fact- blocks the skeptic's initial appeal, by removing the intuition that we cannot be a priori justified in assigning extremely low probability to BIV, and - indeed- believing ~BIV.

Structurally, the argument goes as follows:

- (1) The Obvious Proof Theoretic Fact on its own, gives us no reason for believing any particular proposition to be justified or unjustified.
 - (2) The skeptic can provide no genuine reasons to believe his claim (that we are not justified in believing that we are not dreaming), which are not immediate logical consequences of the Obvious Proof Theoretic Fact.
- (Conclusion) The skeptic can provide no reasons to believe that we are not justified in believing that we are not dreaming.

The first half of this paper argues for (1) and the second argues for (2)

2. The Obvious Proof Theoretic Fact

So, now let me begin by stating the Obvious Proof Theoretic Fact. First, I need to define a notion of being 'question begging against' as an order pair consisting of premises and methods of belief formation $\langle P, M \rangle$ as roughly as follows.

An argument x is question-begging against $\langle P, M \rangle$ iff and x appeals to some premise not in P or method not in M .

The idea here, is to extend the notion of (un)provability in a formal system to apply to patterns of reasoning which include observations, and hence can serve as plausible general model of human reasoning - and then use this to define something analogous to the intuitive idea of an argument question-begging against some particular kinds of opponent (who refuse to accept certain premises or methods forming beliefs) but not others. A sentence is unprovable in a formal system consisting of a set of premises P and inference rules I iff there is no string of sentences such that each sentence is either one of the premises in P or producible from one of the prior sentences in accordance with one of the inference rules in I . To extend this to model partly empirical reasoning, we can allow arguments to consist of strings of sentences together with observation opportunities (e.g. 1. Whenever there is a green light, the machine is on. 2. <Invitation to behold the green light> 3. There is a green light.) Now, allow the possibility of 'belief forming methods' that permit certain transitions from the states of experience/observation to propositional claims. Given this machinery, we can give an official definition, like this:

(def question begging against) An argument (i.e. string of sentences and/or observation opportunities) is question begging against $\langle P, M \rangle$ if it does not have the property that every item in it is either a premise in the premise set P , or an observation opportunity, or producible from some lines prior to it in accordance with the set of belief forming methods in M .

Now here's the obvious proof theoretic fact:

(obvious proof theoretic fact): For any sentence X , there is some $\langle P, M \rangle$ such that all arguments for X (i.e. arguments with X as the last line) are question begging against $\langle P, M \rangle$.

To see that this fact is obvious, just consider the $\langle P, M \rangle$ where both P and M are the empty set. And aside from this general example, it is easy to cook up \langle premise, methods of inference \rangle which fail to allow for a derivation of any particular target sentence you choose. For example, if we let S be "It is raining or it is not raining", then we can choose P be "Turkeys are birds" and M be the inference rule that you can infer from any sentence of the syntactic form "... is a bird." to "... is a mammal".

This much, I take to be uncontroversial - though, of course, you may well doubt the interest of my definitions. Now for the substantial philosophical claims:

The Obvious Proof Theoretic Fact 'on its own' does not give us reason to deny that we have justification for believing any particular proposition. My argument for this has two parts. Firstly, the Obvious Proof Theoretic Fact points out a (potential) detractor that applies to all propositions equally well - including the most basic logical truths which both we and the external world skeptic take ourselves to know most clearly. So mere consideration of the obvious proof theoretic fact doesn't give us reason for drawing any distinctions in justification between different propositions. So, it doesn't give us reason to deny justification for some propositions but not others.

However, this still leaves the possibility that noticing the Obvious Proof Theoretic Fact might give us reason to deny justification to all propositions equally. Perhaps the intuitive notion of justification is such that justification would require being derivable from every possible $\langle P, M \rangle$ set - even the empty one? Here I have a few things to note. Firstly, this does not seem to be the true (at least of my intuitive notion of justification). Secondly, the external world skeptic (by our stipulation that they are an external world skeptic not a pyrrhonian skeptic) cannot accept this. Thirdly, (and more interestingly) any philosopher who is tempted to accept this claim, should give up on the search for a satisfactory resolution to skepticism immediately. This is because it's an obvious mathematical fact that no sentence is derivable in the \langle empty premises, empty inference methods \rangle system. So it should be obvious to such a philosopher "right" now that they can never hope to find an argument for the existence of the external world (or anything else) that can be non-question-beggingly argued for in all $\langle P, M \rangle$ systems. Perhaps this will be the last belief they have before sinking into the dark waters of total Pyrrhonian skepticism.

For these reasons (i.e. putting the two arguments above together) I claim that mere consideration of the Obvious Proof Theoretic Fact gives us no reason for doubting that we are justified in believing we are not dreaming - or any other proposition. A short further step brings us to the claim that will matter against external world skepticism:

Merely pointing out that there is some $\langle P, M \rangle$ system, which every argument that we aren't dreaming begs the question against, does not provide any reason to think that we aren't justified in believing that we aren't dreaming. Insofar as the skeptic has merely shown that there is one possible $\langle P, M \rangle$ system from which does not allow any argument for ~Dreaming, he has done nothing more than I might do by pointing out that the same claim is not derivable in the \langle empty set, empty set \rangle system. And merely pointing out the latter doesn't (even intuitively) give any reason to deny that we are justified in believing ~Dreaming.

Hence, if the skeptic's argument is to succeed, he must do more than show that all arguments for ~Dreaming (e.g. my experience is coherent, nothing feels dreamlike) are question-begging against some $\langle M, P \rangle$ system. He must rather show that they are - as it were- question-begging full stop. That is, he must show that his particular $\langle M, P \rangle$ system (the one that allows all short logical, mathematical, and philosophical inferences, together with transitions from observation opportunities to claims about experience) is one which -unlike the \langle empty set, empty set \rangle system - not to beg the question against.

3. Interlude: how this shifts the burden of proof

The second half of this paper will be occupied with addressing various particular ways the skeptic might try to rise to the occasion. Major suggestions from the literature include the ideas that what the external world skeptic assumes is a)self-evident b)such that it's impossible that he could be wrong while believing it c) such that it's inconceivable that he could be wrong while believing it d) psychologically impossible for him to doubt it d) metaphysically impossible for anyone to doubt. I will argue that none of these claims provide an attractive enough criterion for justification to defeat the intuitive idea that once we have noticed that -formally- all arguments beg the question against something, skeptical hypotheses belong in the same category as total refusal to accept any inferences - i.e. positions that it's epistemically OK to beg the question against.

But I want to pause for a moment here, because if my proposal works, the key move already happened in this first half. The core idea is that skepticism gets its (substantial)

initial appeal from the fact that a) we don't have a very clear idea of what it is for an argument to be question-begging and b) we vaguely feel that evil demons are a serious possibility in the way that perpetual mistakes in basic arithmetic (which Descartes also mentions) are not. Once we distinguish begging the question against a particular position (i.e. set of premises and inference rules accepted) vs. begging the question full stop, controversy with the skeptic turns into a question about whether his position is one of the ones that it's epistemically OK to beg the question against or not. Now, this doesn't yet solve the problem, because we still do feel that begging the question against skepticism about evil demons and perfectly lifelike dreams might be somehow worse than begging the question against skepticism about logic, or basic truths of arithmetic. Perhaps there is some principled consideration (having to do with contingency, conceivability of falsehood, the nature of thought etc.) in virtue of which the latter questions can be begged but not the former.

But importantly, the argumentative situation (and the burden of proof) has shifted - for the following reason.

Once all parties recognize that one can justifiably beg the question against some positions, skeptical positions seem like extremely natural candidates to be included on the list. Intuitively, and ordinarily I do have to justify my belief in Copernican astronomy in a way that doesn't beg the question against someone who believes in Ptolemaic astronomy, but I don't have to justify it in a way that doesn't beg the question against someone who believes in Ptolemaic astronomy "and perfect systematic errors in telescopes which make it look as though Copernican astronomy were true". We might call someone who can't do the first dogmatic (if we are feeling suitably harsh), inability to do the second doesn't seem so bothersome - once we recognize that trivially no belief can be non-question-beggingly justified relative to every formally possible position.

Now this kind of intuition doesn't suffice to carry the day. There are lots of cases where our intuitive judgements (e.g. about what's gold, or what's simultaneous) can be radically wrong. So, it's not a problem in itself, that the skeptic needs to say these intuitions about what positions we can justifiably beg the question against (skepticism about logic, conspiracy theories) are fairly wildly wrong - the possibilities that look like conspiracy theories should be taken seriously. But note that in these cases we have a simple natural kind or strongly motivated principle or theory replacing the mess of ordinary usage, not just the mere suggestion ("maybe everyone thinks tea isn't mud but it actually is"). So, similarly, if you want to argue that common intuitions are radically wrong about what positions it's epistemically permissible to beg the question against, the burden is on you to provide some justification for this revised classification.

Hence, I propose that the skeptic now carries the burden of explaining why their position differs from the total skeptical position in being not OK to beg the question against, and that this provides the entering wedge which will allow us to crack the problem of external-world skepticism in its contemporary form. Descartes, as I understand him, accepted this obligation, and attempted to provide such a criterion, by appeal to the claim that justified belief requires certainty and/or infallibility and the fact that we can't imagine ourselves being wrong about whether we exist, basic math etc. But contemporary epistemologists, who certainly don't won't accept that knowledge requires infallibility or certainty, cannot appeal to any such premises, in their argument that perfect-dream skepticism and other conspiracy theory hypotheses are - despite initial appearances - among those positions which one ought not beg questions against.

4. Skeptical Responses

Let us now turn to responses on the behalf of the BIV skeptic. If the arguments up to this point work, the skeptic will admit that the dispute comes down to a question of epistemic normativity. Which, of all the many mathematically possible belief forming systems is it OK to beg the question against. He will also, presumably, admit that common usage goes against him. We do normally argue that people fail to know because they their (fortunately truthful) reasoning can only be justified on the assumption that e.g. all the witnesses were telling the truth, whereas we don't typically raise analogous objections about people using the assumption that their memory works, or that they are not now dreaming. But - of course - popular opinion is hardly a decisive guide to philosophical questions. So the skeptic can still win, if he can convince us that the ordinary way of drawing the line between what questions can vs. cannot be begged, is somehow worse justified than his way of drawing the line. Thus, if he can come up with a hypotheses about what can be justifiably assumed that is somehow more elegant than ordinary intuitive judgements, and the line where he wants it drawn (we can assume logic and whatever else is needed to get the skeptical argument going, but we can't assume our senses tend to work) - this might well give us reason to alter our common practice, and give up the idea that we are justified in assuming ~BIV. As noted above, I will consider a few different ways to do this - suggested by traditional and contemporary literature - and argue that they all fail.

[paste in responses from blog]

5. Contrasts

I'd like to conclude by noting how the line advocated here differs from other superficially similar answers to skepticism, and relates to topics in epistemology more generally.

In particular, the view advocated here can look like a neo-Moorian response, which says that intuitive verdicts about when it's OK to beg the question are so clear, or obvious somehow, that no possible skeptical argument could give us reason to doubt them. But it is importantly different. I do not take intuitive verdicts about when it's OK to beg the question to have any particularly strong status. I take it that - like intuitive verdicts about what's good manners, or what objects are alive - we can reasonably accord some trust our intuitions about what questions can justifiably be begged, but they are far from infallible. Intuitions about justifications are just a reasonable starting point. The problem with the skeptic is not that they are going against intuitive verdicts which no argument could be strong enough to lead us to question, but rather that they do not have an argument. All their apparent arguments for the claim that it is OK to assume certain necessary truths they need but not to assume ~BIV, (arguments that appeal to necessity, indubitability etc.) fail in their own right, for reasons that have nothing to do with intuitions about ~BIV.

Hence the response to skepticism advocated here leaves open lots of room for positive work in epistemology along traditional lines. It might well be possible to replace our intuitive messy verdicts about what can and cannot be assumed, with various principled distinctions, which are supported by these intuitions themselves, just as we have for the notions of limit and computability.