Calling the Skeptic's Bluff: Brains, Vats, and Irrelevance

(Long abstract)

We all know the skeptic's game: she tells a good story, even a fantastic one, about alien superscientists, abduction, brain surgery, vats with nutritious liquids, etc. Then, while she may admit that she has her doubts, she claims that her story, being at least metaphysically or logically possible, supports the conclusion that human epistemic agents have no empirical knowledge.

Even if we admire the skeptic's ingenuity, we should notice that her argument accounts to some tacit concessions. First, the skeptic cannot directly prove that human epistemic agents have no empirical knowledge. Similarly, the skeptic also cannot directly prove that such knowledge is impossible. A direct proof would require to show that for any empirical proposition, p, there is some proposition q, such that $\Diamond K_s p$ (where s stands for an empirical agent and K is the knowledge operator)[i], entails both q and ~q.[ii] Surely, if the skeptic had such direct proof, she would not have to rely on her scenarios.

More formally, let Γ be the set of propositions the skeptic assumes to express the shared background knowledge upon which she can justify her scenarios. The exact content of Γ is not important; it is enough for our purposes that such a set exists, and if one cared about it, its members could be listed. Without direct evidence to the contrary, the skeptic must accept that $\Gamma \cup \{\Diamond K_s p\}$ is consistent (assuming, of course, that Γ itself is consistent). Similarly, the skeptic's opponent, hereafter the dogmatist, must acknowledge that $\Gamma \cup \{\Diamond S0\}$ (where S0 describes the skeptic's scenario) is also consistent.

Summarizing the situation this way, we can now ask: What can be said about $\Gamma \cup \{\Diamond S0, \Diamond K_s p\}$? Is this set consistent? In the first part of this essay, after reconstructing the skeptic's argument in the next section, I will offer a formal argument that shows that this set is in fact inconsistent. I will refer to this outcome as the Inconsistency Thesis.

The Inconsistency Thesis may be seen as an even bigger victory for the skeptic. Before celebrating the skeptic's newest victory, it should be noticed, however, that her argument is not

complete without some reason to prefer ◊S0 over ◊K_sp. What the skeptic needs is some selection principle. The most obvious such principle, conceivability, will be considered, and ultimately rejected in the second part of the essay. All this consideration is not in vain: it will allow us to establish a list of criteria for these principles. These criteria, it will be argued, will undermine the skeptic's argument. Not because these criteria are too stringent (they aren't), or because they would reveal some inner contradiction in the skeptic's reasoning (they don't), but because it makes the skeptic's argument irrelevant. If the skeptic's story meets these criteria, then the skeptic can prove the impossibility of empirical knowledge directly without the detour of her scenarios.

The second part of the paper will be concluded by a brief reflection on the dogmatist's attempt of proving the skeptic's argument impossible (cf. Putnam's and Davidson's anti-skeptical arguments). I will argue that these arguments are prone to come up short; instead of eliminating the skeptic's challenge they seem to revitalize it. Consequently, the dogmatist should find a different strategy to challenge the skeptic.

In the third part of the essay we will consider the following possible reply by the skeptic: she may argue that she needs no selection principle to complete her case. It is sufficient if her dogmatist opponent cannot eliminate her skeptical challenge. Instead of considering and arguing about whose burden it is to establish or eliminate the skeptic's scenario, I will introduce two further skeptical scenarios, one about the faraway world of a logic demon and the other about the secret world of intelligence gathering. The point of these scenarios is to exploit a (reversed) Straw Man strategy: I will argue that the skeptic has no theoretical tool to eliminate these highly implausible scenarios. To do that she would need some selection principles, but her strategy at this point is that she does not need any of them.

I will argue that we can even dispense, at this point, with the Inconsistency Thesis. If the skeptic wishes, she may allow for the possibility of empirical knowledge (without accepting, of course, its actuality). This strange position would not save the skeptic's scenario – an argument (not very different from the one for the Inconsistency Thesis) will be presented, demonstrating that her scenario would not guarantee that actual epistemic agents do not have empirical knowledge.

The last part of the essay will first address some important asymmetries between the skeptic's and dogmatist's position and argue that contrary to prevailing intuition, these asymmetries prefer the dogmatist position. Then we will consider the elusive nature of the brains-in-a-vat (BIV-) skeptic. Arguably, the BIV argument is less part of the skeptical tradition than of the dogmatist practice. In other words, this argument is a test case for dogmatists to show the strength of their theories. I will argue that the argument against the skeptical argument holds even in this dogmatist setup.

I will conclude the essay with considerations of, and answers to, some nagging questions: we will consider whether or not there is some sense according to which the skeptic's scenario is still possible, and then whether or not we still have some obligations to take the skeptic's position seriously. Both questions will be answered in the negative.

To emphasize, the conclusion of this paper is not that the skeptic's argument can be overcome, or even prevented; similarly, my conclusion is not that the skeptic's argument is too weak for its purpose. Rather, I argue, the skeptic has no argument at all. If the skeptic succeeds, it is because dogmatists grant too much to her at the beginning; what they grant, among others, is that the skeptic actually has an argument. While such latitude about the skeptic's position is not irrational, once we recognize that the skeptic has no argument we should call her bluff and deem her position irrelevant.

---

[i] The proper symbolization of the claim would be, of course, $\exists p \exists s K(s,p)$, but for our purposes the simplified version will do.