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SKEPTICISM AND THE VAGARIES OF JUSTIFIED BELIEF

1. The famous skeptical argument Descartes gives in his *First Meditation* goes something like this: “Among the things I’m most confident about is that there is a blue cube (a paperweight, as it happens) before me. This confidence is based on the evidence of my senses, in this case the visual, tactual, and auditory experiences I’m now having. But wait! I could be having precisely these experiences and not really perceiving anything. It’s consistent with my having these experiences that I’m hallucinating, or that the experiences are being directly caused in me by a very powerful evil demon, or that I’m a BIV [= a bodiless brain in a cubeless vat whose every sensory experience is caused by electrochemical stimulations administered by a computer]. But if my having these very experiences is compatible with their being caused in all these ways, then I’m not justified in believing that there’s a blue cube before me.”

How does Descartes get from the mere logical possibility that these hypotheses are true to the conclusion that he’s not justified in believing what he hitherto took himself to know for certain? After all, it’s logically possible that I have seventeen noses, but nothing of epistemological interest follows from that. To see what I think Descartes had in mind, consider the following situation. There are two diseases,  $D_1$  and  $D_2$ , such that all we know about them of epistemic relevance is that if you have either disease, then you get a distinctive kind of rash. We also know that Jones has a rash of this kind. Can we justifiably believe that Jones has  $D_1$  as opposed to  $D_2$ ? Obviously not. We have no more justification for supposing Jones has  $D_1$  than we have for supposing he has  $D_2$ , and thus we can’t justifiably believe that Jones has  $D_1$ . I think Descartes may be construed as saying that this is our situation with respect to things we believe on the basis of our sense experiences. We are given that Descartes knows that he is currently having such-and-such sense experiences. For him to conclude on the basis of this that there’s a



blue cube before him is for him to accept a certain hypothesis about the cause of his experiences. But that very same evidence, which is all the evidence he has to go on, is equally well explained by alternative and incompatible hypotheses: the hallucination hypothesis, the evil demon hypothesis, the BIV hypothesis, and so on. He's in the same sort of epistemic situation we're in with respect to trying to find out whether Jones has disease  $D_1$  or disease  $D_2$ . Let's give this argument the following restatement:

[A]

- (1) If two incompatible hypotheses  $H$  and  $H'$  equally well explain evidence  $E$ , then  $E$  provides no more reason for believing  $H$  than it does for believing  $H'$ .
- (2) My present sensory experience is equally well explained by the incompatible hypotheses that I'm really perceiving that there is a blue cube before me and that I'm a BIV.
- (3) My present sensory experience is the only evidence I have for evaluating these competing hypotheses.
- (4)  $\therefore$  I have no more reason to believe that I'm really perceiving that there's a blue cube before me than that I'm a BIV.
- (5) If (4), then I'm not justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me.
- (6)  $\therefore$  I'm not justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me.

I think most epistemologists nowadays would protest that [A] presupposes a radically false account of what is required in order for our ordinary perceptual beliefs – such as one's belief that there's a blue cube before one – to be justified. The false, presupposed account holds that the fact that one is currently having the sense experiences one is having constitutes one's *evidence* for the empirical proposition one believes – in this case, the proposition that there's a blue cube before one – and one takes this fact to be good evidence for the proposition because the fact is entailed by that hypothesis which one thinks is the best explanation of the fact. The false picture, it will be said, supposes that the kind of justification I have for believing that there's a blue cube before me is like the kind of justification I have for believing that my child has measles when I infer this from the nature of the spots on his body. The false

picture presupposed by [A] sees me as making an inference to the best explanation from the fact that I seem to see that there's a blue cube before me to the explanation that I seem to see that there's a blue cube before me because I really do see that there's a blue cube before me. Then the argument [A] kicks in to show that, owing to the competing skeptical hypothesis, I'm not warranted in making my inference, and am therefore not justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me.

If that is the false account of what it takes for such perceptual beliefs to be justified, what is the correct account, the account that tells us how such perceptual beliefs are in fact justified? Most epistemologists nowadays would respond in part to this question in the following way. They would claim that my belief that there's a blue cube before me isn't based on any proposition I take to be my evidence or reason for believing that there's one before me. Rather, in the normal case, such as my present belief that there's a blue cube before me, what justifies me in believing that there's a blue cube before me is my merely having the sense experience which causes me to believe that there's a blue cube before me. I am non-inferentially justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me. Sensory experience makes my belief justified, but not by providing the premises for an inference to the best explanation of the causes of that experience; it's the mere having of the experience that renders the belief justified. I don't make any kind of inference to the conclusion that there's a blue cube before me, and I don't believe that there's one before me on the basis of believing that I'm having such-and-such sense experience. I have the sense experience and that both causes me to believe, and, all other things being equal, justifies me in believing, that there's a blue cube before me. A belief that there's a blue cube before one, like a belief that one is conscious, is a belief that can be justified even though it's not based on some further belief which is its justification.

2. The 'all other things being equal' snuck into my gloss of what most philosophers would say hints at why the claim I just put into their mouths can't be the whole story of what justifies my perceptual belief. My justified belief that there's a blue cube before me is *defeasible*. Suppose that I seem to see that there's a blue cube

before me and am thereby led in the normal way to believe that there's a blue cube before me, but that Smith has reason to think that I may be the victim of a hoax involving a hologram of a blue cube (suppose I'm not in a position to have relevant tactual sensations; you can fill in the details). She certainly won't take me to be justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me unless I have *independent* reasons for thinking that what I'm looking at isn't a mere hologram. Once the issue is raised, I can't even argue to myself, "Well, I'm justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me, and thus, owing to the obvious entailment, I'm justified in believing that I'm not looking at a mere hologram of one." If I'm now to be justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me, I must have a justification for believing that I'm not looking at a hologram which justification isn't simply the sense-experience-provided justification I originally had for believing that there's a blue cube before me. If this is correct, what is it about the claim that I'm not looking at a hologram of a blue cube which requires an independent justification for believing it? After all, the hypothesis that there isn't a blue cube before me is consistent with the justification provided by my sense experience for thinking that there is a blue cube before me, but we don't take that alone to show that the sense experience doesn't justify my belief. The answer, or the better part of it, should be clear: if it were merely the case that, in the normal way, there wasn't a blue cube before me, then I wouldn't now seem to see that there's a blue cube before me and wouldn't now believe that there's one before me; but we may suppose that the details of the hologram hypothesis are such that I would still have the experience and the belief if I were looking at a hologram of a blue cube. One needs, it would seem, an independent justification for disbelieving a potentially defeating hypothesis when one would have the justification one actually has if that hypothesis were true.

Parity of reasoning suggests that just as I need an independent justification for believing that I'm not looking at a hologram, at least once that hypothesis has been raised, so, too, I need an independent justification for believing that I'm not a BIV, at least once that skeptical hypothesis has been raised. After all, the moral of the hologram hypothesis seems to be that one needs an independent justification for disbelieving a potentially defeating hypothesis when

one would have precisely the justification one actually has if that hypothesis were true, and that is evidently just as true of the BIV hypothesis as it is of the hologram hypothesis.

All this suggests the following further reconstruction of the skeptical argument:

[B]

- (1) I'm not justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me unless I have a justification for believing that I'm not a BIV which goes beyond whatever justification is provided by my current sensory experience.
- (2) I have no such justification.
- (3) ∴ I'm not justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me.

[B] presents a paradox: each premise seems to some degree creditable when considered on its own, but the two together entail a conclusion we're apt to feel has got to be false.

3. Should we respond to [B] with the following conjunction of claims?

i. Sentence types of the form

(a) *A* is justified in believing that *S*

don't express complete propositions, even when they contain no explicit indexicals or demonstratives, and distinct utterances of the same (a)-sentence, at the same time, can express distinct propositions that differ in truth-value, even when the sentence uttered either contains no indexicals or demonstratives or all explicit indexicals and demonstratives have the same referents in the two utterances.

ii. When two such utterances of the same sentence differ in truth-value, it's because what counts as being justified differs from one utterance to the next, the false proposition expressed demanding more for being justified than is demanded by the true proposition expressed.

iii. Thus, the argument-type [B] expresses no context-independent argument, because none of its steps expresses a context-independent proposition. However, there are semantic mechanisms at work which in certain types of contexts demand a

standard for justified belief which makes it impossible to be justified, by that standard, either in believing that one isn't a BIV or in believing that there's a blue cube before one. One such context is when a skeptical hypothesis like the BIV hypothesis has been made salient. Thus, a typical token of [B] will express a sound argument.

- iv. At the same time, this sound argument strikes us as paradoxical because the proposition expressed by its conclusion is conflated with the proposition that would be expressed by that sentence in more quotidian circumstances, where skeptical hypotheses aren't salient, and in those quotidian contexts an utterance of (3) would be false.

No, I don't think we should respond to [B] with (i)–(iv). I have no trouble accepting (i). Owing to vagueness, there are hardly any sentence types that express propositions. This is because the penumbras of vague terms are highly context sensitive, dilating or constricting according to the communicative intentions of the speaker. This is especially true of the vague terms of epistemic evaluation. I can also accept (ii), at least as regards subjective justification, for in a context in which nothing hangs on it, I might count as being justified in believing that your spouse is fooling around, but in another context in which a lot hangs on it, the same evidence might not count as justifying the belief. But I don't think this kind of context sensitivity bears in any interesting way on the classical skeptical paradox. There are vague sentences that can be taken to say something true in some contexts and something false in others. For example, in certain contexts Harold would be regarded as a solid borderline case of a bald man, but in a context where we're having a Yul Brynner look-alike contest, we might say 'He's not bald' and be counted as speaking truly, whereas if we're considering introducing Harold to Betty, we might say 'No, he's bald; she only likes guys with luxuriant heads of hair' and be counted as speaking truly. But for most vague notions, there are certain sentences that express determinate truths in every context. 'Tom Cruise isn't bald' is such a sentence, and so is 'He's bald' said of someone for whom no hair at all can grow on his scalp. I think that most people, prior to their introduction to skeptical arguments, would regard a normal person's belief that there was a blue cube before her as a paradigm

example of a justified belief, so that the sentence ‘Normal Mary is justified in believing that there’s a blue cube before her’ would count as expressing a determinate truth in every context.

I think (iii) and (iv) are the culprits, but where exactly they are going wrong will depend in part on the intended contextualist semantics for sentences of form (a) (‘A is justified in believing that S’). It’s clear the sort of contextual variation the contextualist needs can’t be due merely to the vagueness of (a); the only contextual variation that would engender is merely the sort of contextual variation to which virtually every sentence is subject. Now, I take it that the contextualist doesn’t want to attribute his needed contextual variation to any *ambiguity* in the words or structure of (a). How, then, does the contextualist propose to get the desired contextual variation? There are a couple of options.

One option would be to ascribe a “hidden-indexical” semantics to (a).<sup>1</sup> The sentence ‘It’s raining’ has a hidden-indexical semantics, because one uttering the sentence literally must be saying that it’s raining at X, for some contextually determined place X. The implicit reference is “hidden,” because there is no word in ‘It’s raining’ which refers to X, and it’s “indexical” because different utterances can refer to different places. If (a) has a hidden-indexical semantics, then a further question arises about the referent of the hidden indexical. There are really only two options here. One is that an utterance of (a) requires an implicit reference to a *standard of justification*, so that an utterance in a quotidian context would express the *true* proposition *that relative to standard Easy, A is justified in believing p*, whereas an utterance in a philosophical context, wherein skeptical hypotheses are salient, would express the *false* proposition *that relative to standard Tough, A is justified in believing p*. The other option for the hidden referent is that it’s a “context of belief,” the idea being that one may be justified in believing a proposition in certain “contexts of belief” but not in others. Of these two options, the first is clearly preferable to the second. In the first place, nothing is really gained by bringing in “contexts of belief,” since one would evidently need different standards of justification just to get the result that believing *p* may be justified in one “context of belief” but not in another. In the second place, I doubt that one can make good sense of the notion of a “context of belief.” But I

won't bother elaborating this last point, because I doubt that any version of the hidden-indexical theory can be correct. The problem, as I argued in my (1995/6), is that when a hidden-indexical theory of (a) is invoked to explain (iv), it commits the contextualist to an implausible error theory. It commits the contextualist to saying that when a token of [B] expresses a sound argument, then the ordinary person's reluctance to accept the conclusion is due to her not realizing that the proposition the token of (3) asserts isn't the one that an utterance of (3) would express in a quotidian context – namely, the *false* proposition that relative to standard Easy/context Quotidian, I'm not justified . . . – but is instead the *true* proposition that relative to standard Tough/context Philosophical, I'm not justified. . . . This is about as plausible as the idea that a competent speaker might state that it's raining in New York in uttering 'It's raining' but mistakenly think she's stating that it's raining in Los Angeles.

There is a further problem. We're supposed to have a proposition – that there is a blue cube before me – that is justified relative to one parameter but not relative to a second parameter. How is this supposed to affect *belief* in the proposition? Suppose that relative to standard Tough I'm not justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me, but that relative to standard Easy I am justified. Should I try not to believe that there's a blue cube before me, or is the endorsement of standard Easy enough to get me off the hook? It's true at the same time that I'm not justified by Tough but am justified by Easy, and we need to know how that is supposed to affect whether I believe that there is a blue cube before me. Of course, it's clear what the contextualist about justified belief has to say. If she says that it's Tough that governs, then she'll have to say that we shouldn't have *any* beliefs about the external world and that therefore we should *never* assert *any* propositions about the external world. That wouldn't be much of a reply to the skeptic. So the contextualist about justified belief must say that Easy governs what we're to believe. Yet that makes Easy the only *operative* standard of justification, the only one to bear on belief formation, and one has to then wonder in what sense Tough is a standard of *justified* belief.

Still another problem is that the skeptical argument aims to show that because one can never have an independent justification for believing that one isn't a BIV, one is never justified in believing

any proposition about the external world based on sense experience. How is the contextualist's appeal to easy standards or contexts supposed to constitute a non-question-begging reply to the skeptic? Suppose our contextualist is a hidden-indexical theorist whose hidden parameters are standards of justification. What exactly is the standard Easy supposed to be? Whatever it is, the contextualist will want to accept that if one is justified in believing  $[p \ \& \ p \rightarrow q]$  relative to Easy, then (perhaps *ceteris paribus*) one is justified in believing  $q$  relative to Easy. Therefore, if relative to Easy I'm justified in believing that there's a blue cube before me, then, since I know that if there is one before me, then I'm not a BIV, the contextualist must allow that relative to Easy I'm justified in believing that I'm not a BIV. Yet this would evidently be a justification earned just by my seeming to see a blue cube before me, without any independent justification for thinking I'm not a BIV, and it's this thought precisely that is being challenged by the skeptic. It's hard to imagine a skeptic being impressed by this sort of contextualist response.

If the contextualist is to have a non-hidden-indexical semantics for (a), then her best option is probably some sort of relevant-alternatives account of justified belief. What is crucial to this idea is that  $A$  is justified in believing  $p$  only if  $A$  is able to rule out relevant alternatives to  $p$  on grounds that are independent of one's prima facie justification for believing  $p$ . As regards the ongoing example, the idea is that when a skeptical hypothesis such as the BIV hypothesis isn't relevant, then one's sense experiences can justify one's perceptual belief without one's having any independent grounds for eliminating the skeptical hypothesis, but that such a hypothesis can be made relevant, and is made relevant when one is considering an argument like [B], and in such cases one must have grounds for eliminating the hypotheses that are independent of one's present sense experience if the perceptual belief caused by the experience is to be justified. And since such independent grounds are impossible, one's perceptual beliefs can't be justified when skeptical hypotheses are relevant. As regards (iv), the relevant-alternatives contextualist must claim that one who resists judging [B] sound does so because she conflates the situation she is in, a situation wherein BIV is a relevant alternative, with all those quotidian situations in which it's not a relevant alternative. Of course, as so far sketched, the proposal

is quite incomplete, since we still need to know what exactly makes a hypothesis “relevant” – i.e., a hypothesis that must be ruled out. Discharging this debt is especially important *vis-à-vis* the skeptical argument [B], since, as we noticed above, the skeptic takes herself to have an argument to show that one can’t *ever* be justified in believing that there’s a blue cube before one.

I don’t see that this way of being a contextualist is more promising than the hidden-indexical way. In addition to its being incomplete in the way indicated, the error theory it entails – a competent speaker confusing her own situation, wherein BIV is a relevant alternative, with quotidian situations, wherein it’s not a relevant alternative – seems as problematic as the error theory the hidden-indexical contextualist is saddled with. Nor does it do any better as regards telling us when we should, or shouldn’t, believe a perceptual proposition. Am I not to believe that there’s a blue cube before me when the BIV hypothesis has been made relevant? If so, does that mean I can go back to believing that there’s one before me if I can manage not to think about envatted brains?

4. Some philosophers, such as Tim Williamson (2000) and John McDowell (1998a), would respond to [B] by denying its first premise in the following way. It’s false, they would say, that one would have the justification one actually has for believing that there’s a blue cube before one if one were a BIV. This is because what actually justifies one in having that belief is the fact that one is having sense experience with a certain etiology, an etiology that takes into account the causes of the experience, and one wouldn’t have experience with that etiology if one were a BIV. McDowell puts the point by saying that “an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone” (pp. 386–387).

I don’t find this response plausible. Evidently, and putting Putnamian worries aside, if I’m actually justified in believing that there’s a blue cube before me, then I would also be justified in believing it if I were a BIV, and what would justify me in that case is the fact, to put it in McDowell’s terms, that I am having an appearance that there’s a blue cube before me – no matter whether

the appearance I'm enjoying is a "mere appearance" or the real McCoy making itself "perceptually manifest" to me. Since I'm having an appearance that there's a blue cube before me whether I'm a BIV or really perceiving a blue cube, there is *a* justification for believing that there's a blue cube before me which I have in either case. What the proponent of the response under consideration would have to say is that my actual justification for believing that there's a blue cube before me is over-determined. There is one justification I have which I would have even if I were a BIV, but there is another which I wouldn't have if I were a BIV, and it's this justification that shows premise (1) to be false. But isn't this tantamount to saying that one justification I actually have for believing that there's a blue cube before me which I wouldn't have if I were a BIV is that my belief was produced in me in a way that secures its truth? This strikes me as ad hoc, given that I already have the internalist justification common to the actual case, as we suppose it to be, and the case as it would be if I were a BIV.

5. What about other ways of responding to [B] by accepting premise (2) but denying premise (1), ways which don't deny that I'd have the same justification for believing that there's a blue cube before me if BIV were true? Two such ways come to mind.

One way would be by denying the closure principle that if one is justified in believing  $[p \ \& \ p \rightarrow q]$ , then one is justified in believing  $q$ . If one rejected that closure principle, then one could argue that one was justified in believing that there was a blue cube before one and that that entailed that one wasn't a BIV, but that one wasn't justified in believing that one wasn't a BIV. But this way of denying premise (1) would have the ludicrous implication that even one who knew that modus ponens was necessarily truth-preserving wouldn't always be justified making inferences one saw that the rule permitted!<sup>2</sup>

A second way of denying premise (1) is the way favored by Tyler Burge, Chris Peacocke, Jim Pryor and others.<sup>3</sup> It's the view Pryor calls 'dogmatism', even though he accepts it. Two preliminaries are needed before stating dogmatism. First, dogmatism isn't intended to apply to all perceptual beliefs, but only to those where the proposition believed is what may be called (and is so called by Pryor) a

*perceptually basic proposition*. Dogmatists may, and evidently do, differ on what it takes to be a perceptually basic proposition, but this won't matter for my purposes, since they would all allow that the proposition that there is a blue cube before one is perceptually basic (Peacocke and Pryor, and probably Burge, would deny that the proposition that there is a dog before one is perceptually basic). Second, let's stipulate that a *defeating hypothesis* for one's belief that  $p$  is any hypothesis incompatible with  $p$  such that if it were true, one would still believe  $p$  with exactly the same justificatory basis as one actually has.<sup>4</sup> Defeating hypotheses may be either *ordinary* defeating hypotheses, such as the hologram and painted mule hypotheses, or *skeptical* defeating hypotheses, such as BIV and the other famous skeptical hypotheses. Dogmatism may then be defined as holding:

- (i) Necessarily, for any perceptually basic proposition  $p$ , having sense experience as of  $p$ 's being the case directly and non-inferentially justifies one's believing  $p$ , unless one is justified in suspecting that a defeating hypothesis is true.
- (ii) A perceptually basic proposition  $p$  may be such that (a) one's sense experience as of  $p$ 's being the case directly and non-inferentially justifies one in believing  $p$  and (b) one is not justified independently of that experience in disbelieving what one knows to be a defeating hypothesis.
- (iii) When one is justified in suspecting that a defeating hypothesis  $H$  is true, then one's perceptually basic belief that  $p$  is justified only if one has a justification for disbelieving  $H$  that is independent of one's sense experience as of  $p$ 's being the case.
- (iv) When the prima facie status of one's sense experience is undefeated and it directly and non-inferentially justifies one in believing perceptually basic  $p$ , then, if one is justified in believing that defeating hypothesis  $H$  is false if  $p$  is true, one's sense experience also justifies one in disbelieving  $H$ .

Thus, the crucial thing about dogmatism as a response to [B] is that it enables one to deny premise (1) by allowing one to be justified in believing that there is a blue cube before one even though one isn't justified in disbelieving BIV independently of one's seeming to see a blue cube. In this regard it's important to notice that (ii)(b) is crucial, because without it dogmatism wouldn't entail a basis for

denying [B]'s premise (1). To see this, suppose that (i) is true but that (ii)(b) is false, in that, while sense experience provides a direct and non-inferential justification, it's nevertheless the case that one lacks a justification for "suspecting" that a defeating hypothesis *H* is true only if one is justified in disbelieving *H* independently of one's sense experience as of *p*'s being the case. In that case, one would be provided with no basis for denying [B]'s premise (1).

It's also useful to characterize the difference between the dogmatist and one who accepts premise (1) in terms of Crispin Wright's useful phrase 'transmission of warrant'.<sup>5</sup> The dogmatist affirms, while one who accepts premise (1) denies, that in an inference such as

Here is a blue cube before me.

If there is a blue cube before me, then BIV/Hologram is false.

So, BIV/Hologram is false.

one's warrant, or justification, for believing the premises may be transmitted from the premises to the conclusion, when one's only warrant for the first premise is one's current visual experience and one has no independent reason for disbelieving the defeating hypothesis.<sup>6</sup> One who accepts premise (1) of [B] holds that warrant isn't transmitted, because one won't be justified in believing the just-displayed first premise unless one already has a justification for believing the conclusion that is independent of one's seeming to see a blue cube before one.

There is a feature of the typical case of justified perceptual belief that is apt to make the dogmatic position seem more plausible than it really is. You come into my office for the first time and seem to see a blue cube on my desk. It never occurs to you that you're looking at a hologram. You seem to see a blue cube and straightway you believe that there's one before you. Even though you did nothing to discount the possibility that your visual experience wasn't veridical, your belief is justified. If, however, you were to acquire some positive evidence that, say, I was equipped to produce holograms and liked playing practical jokes, then your justification would be defeated and could only be restored after you acquired suitable independent evidence that you weren't looking at a hologram of a blue cube. But this highly typical scenario does nothing to support the dogmatic

position, because when you seemed to see a blue cube, *you already had an independent justification for believing that you weren't looking at a hologram*. For all sorts of good and obvious reasons, you knew that it was extremely unlikely that I either could or would perpetrate such a hoax. At the time when you saw the blue cube, you were justified, on grounds wholly independent of your seeming to see a blue cube, in believing that you weren't looking at a hologram of such a thing. True, you *did* nothing in my office, performed no test or investigation, to earn an independent justification for disbelieving the hologram hypothesis, but that is just because you already had the independent justification. The dogmatic position gets no support from this sort of normal case.

We can't properly assess the displayed statement of dogmatism, (i)–(iv), until we know what propositional attitude the occurrence in (i) of 'suspecting' is intended to signify. In reflecting on examples like the hologram scenario in the preceding paragraph, it seems to me that the dogmatist needs the following precisification of "suspecting," or something very close to it:

- (D) Suppose that if undefeated one's sense experience as of  $p$ 's being the case justifies one in believing  $p$  to degree  $n$ . Then the prima facie justification provided by one's sense experience is defeated if for some defeating hypothesis  $H$  one is justified at the time of the experience in believing  $H$  to a degree greater than  $1 - n$ . At that point one is justified in believing  $p$  *tout court* only if one has a justification for disbelieving  $H$  that is independent of one's sense experience as of  $p$ 's being the case.

For example, all other things being equal, your seeming to see a blue cube on my desk justifies you in believing that there is a blue cube before you to, say, degree 0.9. However, when you appreciate that I have a hologram machine and on occasion like to fool people, then you're justified in believing to a degree greater than 0.1 that you're looking at a hologram. Suppose that in fact you're justified at that point in believing the hologram hypothesis to degree 0.3. Then, of course, it must be that at that point you can't be justified in believing that there's a blue cube before you to a degree greater than 0.7, and the issue can be rationally resolved for you only by

gaining evidence that is independent of your seeming to see a blue cube, say, by reaching to touch the blue cube you seem to see.

There is a problem for dogmatism if (D) is, as I suggested, the correct precisification of the dogmatist's claim (i). To see the problem, let's look a little more closely at why the dogmatist gains no support from the scenario described two paragraphs back. In that scenario, you enter my office, seem to see a blue cube on my desk, and straightway have the justified belief that there is a blue cube before you. Further, since you know the relevant entailment, you would thereby be justified in believing that you're not looking at a hologram of a blue cube. The reason the scenario might have initially seemed to favor the dogmatist is that it's apt to seem that, since you did nothing to rule out the hologram hypothesis, you had no justification for disbelieving it which went beyond the visual experience that seemed directly to justify you in believing that there was a blue cube before you. What we noticed, however, was that your justification for believing the hologram hypothesis to a very low degree – and thereby *disbelieving* it to a very high degree – “went beyond” your seeming to see a blue cube in that it pertained to entirely independent grounds for thinking it extremely implausible that the hologram hypothesis was the correct explanation of your visual experience. Now, nothing prevents the dogmatist from claiming that you had more than one justification for disbelieving the hologram hypothesis, but let's notice what must be going on in order for the dogmatist-required justification for disbelieving the hologram hypothesis to be the *only* justification in play.

Although it's not reasonable to suppose that the partial beliefs of ordinary people satisfy the classical laws of probability theory, it is reasonable to suppose that the sort of partial belief in question is *normatively governed* by those laws and that the rationality of normal people secures that if such a person believes a proposition  $p$  to degree  $n$ , then she ipso facto disbelieves  $p$  (i.e. believes  $\sim p$ ) to degree  $1 - n$ . Let  $B$  represent your partial belief function,  $H$  the hologram hypothesis,  $E$  the proposition that you're having a visual experience as of there being a blue cube before you, and  $C$  the proposition that there is a blue cube before you. Part of what explains (what we pretended to be) the fact that  $B(H) = 0.1$  when  $B(C) = 0.9$  was that, at the moment before  $E$  became true,  $B(H/E)$

– the degree to which you believed  $H$ , given  $E$  – was very low, and the justification for this partial conditional belief was based on your views about why, in the circumstances,  $H$  would be a very unlikely explanation of  $E$ . But now let's suppose this is a case that satisfies the dogmatist's (ii)(b), in that you aren't justified independently of your seeming to see a blue cube in disbelieving  $H$ . In that event, we should have to suppose either that (a) your partial belief function,  $B$ , was undefined for  $H$ , or else that (b)  $B(H/E)$  was high enough so that the subsequent fact that  $B(H) = 0.1$  represented a violation of the laws of probability. But (a) is ruled out by the facts of the case, and (b), apart from its being of dubious coherence, is ruled out by the fact that if  $B(H/E)$  were sufficiently high, then that would secure that you were justified in "suspecting" that the defeating hypothesis  $H$  was true, in which case (ii)(b) would be precluded from applying. Nothing changes, so far as I can tell, when the defeating hypothesis is stipulated to be a skeptical hypothesis.

Generalizing, we may state the problem for the dogmatist in the following way. If  $J$  justifies one in believing  $q$  to degree  $n$ , then  $J$  ipso facto justifies one in believing  $\sim q$  to degree  $1 - n$ . Now, consider a case where one's experience as of perceptually basic  $p$ 's being the case is undefeated and thus directly and non-inferentially justifies one in believing  $p$  to, say, degree 0.9. Let  $H$  be any defeating hypothesis for  $p$  such that one is justified in believing  $H$  to some degree  $n \leq 0.1$ . Suppose it's 0.1. Then, by construction of the case, one's justification for believing  $\sim H$  to degree 0.9 must count as going beyond whatever justification for believing  $p$  is provided by one's having a sense experience as of  $p$ 's being the case. The upshot is that the dogmatist's (ii)(b) can't be true. When one's sense experience directly and non-inferentially justifies one in believing  $p$ , then one has no reason to suspect that defeating hypothesis  $H$  is true. Given (D), this means that to whatever degree one is justified in believing  $H$ , it's below the relevant threshold set by one's prima facie justification for believing  $p$ . But whatever it is that justifies one's believing  $H$  to the low degree in question is both (in the relevant sense) independent of the sense experience in question and what justifies one in believing  $\sim H$  to the high degree fixed by the low degree to which one believes  $H$ .

There is another problem for the dogmatist: the dogmatist has no response to the skeptic about *non*-basic perceptual propositions. The dogmatist holds that if  $p$  is a non-basic perceptual proposition, then one is justified in believing  $p$  only if one is justified in disbelieving defeating hypotheses independently of one's sense experience as of  $p$ 's being the case. For example, Pryor (2001) holds that when at the zoo one seems to see a zebra, one won't be justified in believing that there really is a zebra there unless one is justified independently of that visual experience in believing that one isn't looking at a mule made to look exactly like a zebra. But now consider a version of the brain-in-the-vat hypothesis according to which one's perceptually basic beliefs are reliable but all one's other perceptual beliefs, though justified, are false. The dogmatist, qua dogmatist, seems not to have any response at all to this version of the classical skeptical argument, and if that is so, dogmatism is of very marginal interest as a reply to skepticism.

6. Common sense rebels against the thought that [B] is sound, and it's natural to think that one of its two premises is determinately false. I want to consider one final response to [B] which attempts to make good on what it's natural to think.<sup>7</sup> I don't think this final response is plausible, but it will help to set up and to clarify my final resolution of the skeptical paradox [B] provides.

The response in question is that premise (2) is false in that I am *a priori* justified in disbelieving BIV, and this because I'm *a priori* justified in disbelieving any skeptical hypothesis which I know to entail an hypothesis  $H$  such that (a) I must be justified in disbelieving  $H$  if I'm to be justified in believing any perceptual proposition about the external world and (b) for which it's not possible for me to be justified in disbelieving on non-question-begging empirical grounds. This response supposes that, as regards justified belief, there is a big difference between *ordinary* defeating hypotheses like Hologram and Painted Mule, on the one hand, and *skeptical* defeating hypotheses like BIV, Evil Demon, Hallucination, etc., on the other hand. We can and do have perfectly good *a posteriori* empirical grounds for disbelieving in ordinary settings that we're not looking at holograms or for disbelieving that someone at the Bronx Zoo has ingeniously disguised a mule to look like a zebra and placed

it in the pen marked 'Zebras'. But we can have no such grounds for disbelieving the classical skeptical hypotheses, for nothing could count as a posteriori justification unless we were already justified in disbelieving these hypotheses. Owing to their special presuppositional status, we don't need any empirical grounds for being justified in disbelieving a skeptical defeating hypothesis. It's simply an a priori truth that we are justified in disbelieving them.

Given the concept of justified belief we actually have, this way of rejecting premise (2) is not plausible. There are propositions which we count ourselves as being a priori justified in believing without further ado, even without a priori grounds. The proposition that if there are dogs, then there are dogs and the proposition that husbands are married may enjoy such a status. Perhaps the proposition that I exist or that I'm conscious also enjoys this status, if we count self-evidence as a kind of a priori justification. But the contingent proposition that I am not a brain in a vat is nothing like those propositions. Believing the proposition doesn't secure its truth, and it deploys no concepts whose possession requires one to believe the proposition. There is nothing in the concept of a priori justified belief to warrant the claim that we're a priori justified in disbelieving skeptical hypotheses. Crispin Wright had it right when he asked rhetorically, "[How can it] be rational to have confidence in the truth of a proposition for which one has *absolutely no evidence*, whether empirical or a priori. That a warrant to believe that *someone else* is not currently undergoing a sustained lucid dream would have to be evidence-based seems absolutely compelling; how can it make a difference if the subject involved is oneself?"<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the idea that we should be deemed a priori justified without further ado in disbelieving skeptical hypotheses is, I shall now suggest, part of the best resolution of the skeptical paradox we confront.

7. Classical skeptical arguments constitute *paradoxes*, sets of apparently mutually incompatible propositions each one of which appears plausible when viewed on its own. The premises of [B] and the negation of its conclusion comprise such a set. A *happy-face* solution to a paradox does two things, assuming that the propositions comprising the set really are mutually incompatible: first, it

identifies the odd-guy-out, the member of the set that's not true; and second, it shows us why this spurious proposition deceived us, strips from it its patina of truth, so that we're not taken in by it again. The paradox of the barber who shaves all and only those who don't shave themselves has a happy-face solution, for all sense of paradox disappears once we see that the existence of such a barber is logically impossible. But it's my view that some classical philosophical paradoxes – for example, the problem of free will and the sorites – don't have happy-face solutions, and I believe that the paradox that [B] provides also fails to have a happy-face solution.

When a paradox lacks a happy-face solution it's because there's a certain kind of glitch in the concept, or concepts, generating the paradox. Aspects of the concept's underived conceptual role – the conceptual role the concept has regardless of whatever propositional attitudes one happens to have – are in tension, pull us in different directions, and there is nothing else in the concept or elsewhere to resolve that tension for us. Possessors of the concept can feel the tension to varying degrees, and they can react to it in various ways. Consider that paradox we call the problem of free will. Here the paradox consists in the prima facie plausibility of each of three mutually incompatible propositions: (i) that we have free will, i.e., that at least some of the things we do we do freely, of our own free will; (ii) that everything we do is such that we were caused to do it by factors over which we had no control, perhaps factors that obtained even before we were born; and (iii) that (i) is false if (ii) is true. For each of (i)–(iii) there is a classical “solution” to the problem of free will which deems it the odd-guy-out. Where each of these would-be happy-face solutions fails is in explaining away the plausibility of its chosen odd-guy-out. Philosophers have been debating the problem of free will for centuries, and they are still debating it, with philosophers lined up behind each of the solutions in logical space. If the problem of free will had a happy-face solution, I think we would have heard about it by now. As David Hume observed in connection with a different issue, one should suspect that “an hypothesis, so obvious, had it been a true one, would, long ere now, have been received by the unanimous suffrage and consent of mankind” (1751/1957, p. 98).

I submit that the problem of free will has no happy-face solution because of a tension in the underived conceptual role of that concept. One aspect of the concept inclines us to apply the concept to certain paradigm cases, acts that are free if any are, whereas another aspect of the concept disinclines us to apply the concept to an act when we learn that the actor was caused to do what she did by factors over which she had no control. Further, there is nothing in the concept or elsewhere – no conceptual court of appeals – to resolve the tension by pronouncing one inclination legitimate, the other illegitimate. It's not that the concept of free will is inconsistent, like the concept of a round square, for we don't regard each inclination as providing its own necessary condition for the correct application of the concept. Moreover, different possessors of the concept of free will can feel the tension to varying degrees, as can one person from one moment to the next, and people can react to the tension in different ways. For example, there can be three people who agree that, for the reasons just laid out, the problem of free will can't have a happy-face solution, but then go on from there in three different directions. One guy decides that for this, that, or the other reason, he'll henceforth be a consistent compatibilist, content to say that an act was freely done when the agent was caused to perform the action by unpathological propositional attitudes. A second guy decides to count a person as morally blameless whenever she was caused to do what she did by factors over which she had no control, even when the propositional attitudes she was caused to have are ones we deem rational and unpathological. And a third guy says that intelligent adults have no need for any notion of free will or moral responsibility.

Here is what I think is going on with the skeptical paradox [B] provides. There is a glitch in our concept of epistemic justification. One aspect of the underived conceptual role of that concept tells us that ordinary perceptual beliefs are a bench mark for justified belief. But another aspect tells us that a perceptual belief is justified only if the believer is independently justified in disbelieving defeating hypotheses, hypotheses that are incompatible with one's perceptual belief but such that one would have exactly the sense experience leading to one's perceptual belief even if the hypothesis were true. We then realize that we can have no such independent justifications for the all-embracing skeptical hypotheses; hence the skeptical

paradox [B] provides. But it's unthinkable to us that we should stop believing and asserting propositions like the proposition that there's a blue cube before me or the proposition that I have hands, and we're so built as information-processing machines that it's doubtful that we could stop having those beliefs if we wanted to. We also recognize that it's absurd to suppose we can be justified in believing that we have hands while not being justified in disbelieving that we're handless brains in vats. Finally, there is nothing in our concept of epistemic justification or elsewhere that resolves these conflicts. There is no conceptual court of appeals.

A paradox that has no happy-face solution may have an unhappy-face solution. One important thing an unhappy-face solution does is explain what it is about the underived conceptual roles of the paradox-generating concept which precludes a happy-face solution. This is what I tried to do in the preceding paragraph. But an unhappy-face solution can do more. It can tell us whether the paradox admits of a *weak* or a *strong* unhappy-face solution.<sup>9</sup> A weak unhappy-face solution is a *mildly* unhappy-face solution and says that a glitch-free version of the concept is possible which does the work we expected from the problematic concept, whereas a strong unhappy-face solution is a *very* unhappy-face solution and says that no such unparadoxical surrogate can be fashioned. As Tarski recognized, the semantic paradoxes can have no happy-face solution owing to features of our ordinary concept of truth in conjunction with certain logical concepts. But work on truth such as Kripke's suggests that paradox-free alternative accounts of truth are possible, which don't generate the semantic paradoxes, thus showing that the semantic paradoxes have a weak unhappy-face solution. I have argued in other writings that the sorites can have only a strong unhappy-face solution,<sup>10</sup> and I'm inclined to think the same is true of the problem of free will. But I believe that the classical skeptical paradox of which [B] is an instance enjoys a weak unhappy-face solution.

It is crucial to our survival and well-being that, roughly speaking, the greater the degree to which we believe a proposition, the more likely that proposition is to be true. The point of our having a notion of justified belief is to enable us to mark the distinction between those of our belief states which satisfy that desideratum and those

that don't, and to do this in ways we can *use*. Now, as I said above, we are so built as information processors that we can't help but believe  $p$  when in normal circumstances we have a sense experience as of  $p$ 's being the case. That is a given and has to be our starting point in asking whether a rehabilitated concept of epistemic justification is possible. Any practicable notion of justified belief must count those beliefs as justified, since those beliefs are perforce the foundation for all other beliefs about the external world. At the same time, the closure of justified beliefs under known entailment isn't negotiable; no coherent notion of justified belief can deem us justified in believing a proposition but not in believing what we know to be entailed by that proposition. The upshot is that we can have no practicable notion of epistemic justification that doesn't count us as justified in disbelieving those propositions whose falsity is presupposed by the perceptual beliefs we can't help but have. If, as seems to be the case, that justification can't be earned, then there is nothing for it but to count our disbeliefs in skeptical hypotheses as justified and be done with it. With those beliefs out of the way, we can have a notion of justified belief that can do the work we want it to do. A rehabilitated notion of justified belief should simply count us as a priori justified in disbelieving skeptical defeating hypotheses, even though nothing earns that justification.

Given the notion of justified belief we *actually* have, we can't say that premise (2) of [B] is false; still less can we say that we have an unearned a priori justification for disbelieving BIV or any other skeptical hypothesis. But if we let 'justification\*' be the rehabilitated notion of epistemic justification I'm proposing by way of a weak unhappy-face solution to the paradox [B] provides, and we replace 'justification' and its cognates in my statement of [B] with 'justification\*' and its cognates, then we can say that premise (2) is determinately false owing to our being a priori justified\* in disbelieving BIV. We have an a priori justification\* we did nothing to earn, simply because we can't otherwise have what we need from a notion of epistemic justification. We are justified\* in disbelieving these hypotheses simply by virtue of their special presuppositional status *vis-à-vis* those empirical propositions we can't afford not to think or assert.<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Schiffer (1995/6).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. DeRose (1995) on “abominable conjunctions.”

<sup>3</sup> Burge (1993), Peacocke (forthcoming), Pryor (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, of course, the proposition that one is looking at a hologram of a blue cube and the proposition that there’s a blue cube before one are not incompatible. But it’s trivial to state the defeating hypothesis in a way that secures incompatibility, and we should deem that to be done.

<sup>5</sup> Wright (1985).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Pryor (2001).

<sup>7</sup> I should add “one final response” as regards my current discussion. There is another response which I think is worth discussing, although I don’t in the end think it can be made to account for the justification common sense takes an ordinary person’s perceptual beliefs to enjoy. I allude to the idea that there are criteria for what counts as being a good explanation which entitle one to believe that no version of a traditional skeptical hypothesis – Evil Demon, BIV, Hallucination, etc. – can provide as good an explanation of one’s sense experience as those science and common sense deem correct (see, e.g., Vogel, 1990). An adequate discussion of this response would take me too far from my more immediate concerns in this paper.

<sup>8</sup> (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Schiffer (2000, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Schiffer, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> An earlier version of this article was read at the conference “Contextualism in Epistemology and Beyond,” at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, October 2002. Stewart Cohen commented on my paper, and I benefited from his comments, and from the general discussion of my paper. I’m also indebted to Yuval Avnir, Chris Peacocke, and Jim Pryor for conversations with me on the topics of this paper.

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