Barry Stroud is well known as a critic of philosophers who purport to answer, or otherwise deflate, the threat of skepticism of the external world. He is perhaps most famous in this regard for his seminal paper on transcendental arguments, in which he argues that the prospects of defeating the skeptic with such arguments typically depend upon an implausible form of the verification principle (Stroud 1968). There he mostly focuses upon Strawson and Shoemaker. But since then, Stroud has addressed strategies taken against skepticism as varied as those proposed by Kant, Moore, Austin, Carnap, Quine, Cavell, Davidson, and Sosa, in each case meticulously articulating precisely why the strategy could not ultimately succeed (Stroud 1984, 1994b, 1999a). It is not surprising that Stroud is sometimes thought of—if incorrectly—as the quintessential skeptic. It is all the more notable, then, that in several later papers Stroud argues that we face no threat of skepticism after all. If he who has been so carefully critical of enterprises that purport to answer, or otherwise deflate, the threat of skepticism now argues that we face no such threat at all, skeptics must take heed; it is an argument to be taken very seriously.

In this chapter, I want to discuss the prospects of Stroud’s argument that we face no threat of skepticism. At this juncture, I find myself not yet persuaded. I cannot help believing that it relies on a questionable and unmotivated assumption concerning what is required to raise a skeptical threat. In sections 2 and 3, I will explain my doubts. What

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1. Stroud 1999a. Page references in the text, unless otherwise noted, are to this paper. Stroud’s argument also appears in Stroud 2003 and, in part, in Stroud 1999b and Stroud 1994a.
I have been convinced of, however, is the value of pursuing the general antiskeptical strategy that Stroud employs, of which his particular argument is only an instance. In section 4, I will implement this strategy in a different way. In particular, after underscoring the aspects of Stroud’s strategy I find most promising, I will argue that standard arguments for skepticism ultimately depend upon a methodological premise that the skeptic has little reason to accept.

1. STRoud’S ANTIsKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

Stroud explains the skeptic’s line of argument as follows. It begins with the skeptic’s acknowledgment that something’s being so does not in general follow from its being believed by someone to be so. From this, the skeptic infers that the truth of most or all of one’s beliefs does not follow from the fact that one holds these beliefs: it is logically possible that most or all of one’s beliefs are false. (I will refer to this possibility as “the skeptical possibility.”) According to Stroud, the skeptic then challenges us to explain how we know or have good reason to believe that the skeptical possibility is not actual with respect to ourselves. Skepticism is, or would be, the consequence of further considerations that show that we could never meet this challenge. Skepticism, as Stroud understands it, is the conclusion that we do not know or have good reason to believe what we think we know or have good reason to believe.

Stroud distinguishes his antiskeptical strategy from Donald Davidson’s, which is similar to his own in some important respects. Both strategies, as Stroud says, attempt to “block the potentially sceptical line of thinking right at the beginning” (1999a, 156). Davidson himself argues that it is in fact logically impossible for a subject’s beliefs to be largely false: belief is, in Davidson’s words, “in its nature veridical.” Indeed, Stroud grants that if this were logically impossible, the skeptical threat could never get off the ground, but he argues that Davidson fails to show that it is. No amount of transcendental investigation, Stroud believes, will ever take us from the fact that a subject holds all of the beliefs that he does to the conclusion that those beliefs are largely true. That was the central lesson of “Transcendental Arguments.”

Still, Stroud does find antiskeptical significance in a particular premise of Davidson’s argument. He appeals to Davidson’s idea that in order to attribute beliefs to a particular subject (on the basis of the subject’s behavior), an attributor must believe that his

2. Stroud notes that there are certain exceptions, e.g., a subject’s belief that there exists someone who believes something.

3. I call it the “skeptical” possibility, because it is the possibility that is appealed to in the skeptic’s line of thinking (as Stroud understands it). The skeptical possibility is not the possibility that skepticism is true. Our beliefs could be largely true, and yet skepticism still be correct.

4. Davidson (2001, 146). In his response to Stroud’s objection, Davidson appears to reject Stroud’s attribution to him of the view that the skeptical possibility is not a logical possibility. See Davidson 1999, 162.
subject’s beliefs are largely true. This is a thesis Stroud finds both in Davidson’s writings on radical interpretation and in Tyler Burge’s work on anti-individualism. It is supposed to hold not only for Davidson’s “radical interpreter” but for all of us. Even where we find considerable disagreement between ourselves and others, such disagreement is intelligible only against a “background” of “widespread agreement” (Davidson 1984, 153). Davidson writes:

Making sense of the utterances and behaviour of others, even their most aberrant behaviour, requires us to find a great deal of reason and truth in them. To see too much unreason on the part of others is simply to undermine our ability to understand what it is they are so unreasonable about. (1984, 153)

Likewise, Burge says that anti-individualistic considerations provide a “qualified basis for the oft-repeated slogan that error presupposes a background of veridicality” (Burge 1986, 130–131). It is this thesis—not the claim that belief is in its nature largely true, but the weaker claim that “belief-attribution is in its nature largely truth-ascribing” (Davidson 1984, 155)—that is what Stroud thinks is capable of blocking the skeptical strategy from arising right at the beginning. I will refer to this thesis about belief attribution as the “Truth-Ascription Thesis.”

There are of course substantive questions to be raised about this thesis. What degree of agreement is truly guaranteed? And concerning what sorts of beliefs? I won’t pursue such questions here, since I am primarily interested in what antiskeptical conclusions the thesis may have. Still, two clarifications about the thesis may be helpful. First, the thesis is not meant to apply to every substantial subset of a person’s beliefs that an attributor might try to identify. Perhaps an interpreter could identify a subject’s beliefs about a certain subject matter (theology, for example) and nonetheless take those beliefs to be largely false. Rather, the thesis is meant to apply to all of the beliefs an attributor takes his subject to have. Second, the Truth-Ascription Thesis is often characterized in terms of beliefs being thought to be “largely” true or “mostly” true. This can suggest that beliefs are countable and that what the thesis guarantees is that a high percentage of all of the beliefs an attributor attributes to a subject will be believed by the attributor to be true. Expressed this way, the thesis is again dubitable. It is perhaps best to construe the agreement guaranteed

5. For the thesis as it appears in Davidson’s work, see Davidson 1984. For Burge, see Burge 1986.

6. Stroud’s use of this thesis for antiskeptical purposes is novel. Davidson himself does not attempt to avert skepticism with it alone. And Burge explicitly expresses doubts about the plausibility of arguing against skepticism from considerations about anti-individualism.

7. They are important though. Some agreement is no doubt required; the question is whether the degree guaranteed is enough to do the work Stroud asks of it. It is worth noting, however, that the thesis does not depend upon any “externalist” view of the individuation of belief. One might disagree heartily with Davidson and Burge on how the content of belief gets fixed yet nonetheless agree with them about the constraints upon an interpreter’s procedure for successfully identifying or discerning what a given subject believes.
as primarily concerning a subject’s most fundamental or “basic” beliefs (beliefs about one’s immediate environment, for example). 8

Now, how is the Truth-Ascription Thesis supposed to remove the skeptical threat? Stroud gives two explanations, each of which I will focus on in substantial detail: (1) In some passages, Stroud argues that the Truth-Ascription Thesis implies that the skeptical possibility is “not a possibility we could consistently believe to be actual,” and that this inability removes the threat of skepticism (Stroud 1999a, 157); (2) In other places, Stroud argues that the Truth-Ascription Thesis reveals that no one could ever assume “the disengaged position” from which the skeptical challenge must be posed (1999a, 157). I want to look critically at both of these explanations. I will discuss the first explanation in section 2 and the second in section 3. I will devote considerably more space to the latter, as I claim it is more promising. While these two explanations are no doubt intimately related, treating them separately is the most helpful way to proceed.

Before commencing, let me make explicit that in neither case does Stroud attempt to prove that we do know that our beliefs are largely true. Stroud appeals to the conditions on belief attribution not to infer the truth of those beliefs and thereby to answer the skeptic’s challenge, but rather to show that the skeptic’s challenge never gets off the ground in the first place. This is one reason why Stroud’s argument is sometimes called a “modest” transcendental argument. 9 I will say more about this in section 4.

2. THE SKEPTICAL POSSIBILITY AND MOORE’S PARADOX

Let us turn to Stroud’s first way of characterizing the antiskeptical significance of the Truth-Ascription Thesis. In this characterization, Stroud argues that what this thesis implies is that the skeptical possibility is “not one which anyone could consistently find to be actual” (156). Stroud’s idea is that any serious skeptical threat would concern a certain set of beliefs, someone’s beliefs, whether one’s own, another person’s, or everyone’s. According to the Truth-Ascription Thesis, however, simply to identify the contents of someone’s beliefs for skeptical consideration, one must find the set of beliefs to be largely true. What one could never do, then, is identify someone’s set of beliefs for skeptical scrutiny and then consistently take them to be largely false.

Stroud compares the relation in which one stands to the skeptical possibility to the relation in which one stands to the possibility expressed in G. E. Moore’s paradoxical sentence,

I believe that it is raining, and it is not raining.

8. See Davidson 1990, 325.
9. Anthony Brueckner (1996) and Christopher Hookway (1999) both characterize Stroud’s argument in this way (or at least, his argument involving the first explanation of the antiskeptical significance of the Truth-Ascription Thesis; Stroud did not fully offer the second explanation until Stroud 1999a.)
That sentence, uttered by someone, could be true. It expresses a genuine possibility. But it is a possibility that no one can consistently believe is actual. One cannot consistently believe that it is actual, even though one can consistently believe that it is a logical possibility. The same goes for the skeptical possibility, Stroud argues. It is a genuine possibility, but a possibility no one can consistently believe is actual, even though one can believe that it is a logical possibility.\(^\text{10}\)

What puzzles me is not this intermediate conclusion that one could never consistently take the skeptical possibility to be actual of a particular, specified subject(s), which for now I will grant, but rather the antiskeptical inferences Stroud draws from it. From this alone, Stroud concludes that the skeptical possibility “can be eliminated from serious consideration right at the beginning” and that we could never produce a skeptical threat (156–157). It is important to give the reader a sense of the direct inferences Stroud makes, because they are really all that Stroud provides in explaining the significance of our inability to take the skeptical possibility to be actual. He writes:

There can be no general threat [as applied to any particular set of beliefs anyone might consider] because our considering the specific attributed beliefs we are asking about guarantees that we find those beliefs to be for the most part true. (157)

So the abstract possibility from which the sceptical reasoning typically starts could pose no serious threat as applied to any particular set of beliefs anyone might consider. Not because it is in no sense a possibility at all that those beliefs are false, but because, even though it is in the weakest sense a possibility, it is not a possibility anyone could ever consistently find to be actual when specific, determinate beliefs are under consideration. (Stroud 2003, 24–25)

Our having [our beliefs] and their being all or mostly false is not a possibility we could consistently believe to be actual, so it is not a possibility we could be pressed to explain how we know is not actual. (1999a, 157)

It is the impossibility of consistently finding or believing that possibility to be actual that I think follows from anti-individualism about our thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs.

If that is so, then we cannot take seriously the possibility that the beliefs we take ourselves to have are for the most part not true. (2003, 25)

\(^{10}\) Brueckner’s criticism of Stroud’s argument challenges Stroud at this juncture. Brueckner argues that Stroud’s endorsement of the intermediate conclusion renders Stroud unable to maintain that it is logically possible for a subject’s beliefs to be largely false. In order to claim that this is logically possible, Brueckner says, one must be able to conceive of a possible world in which there exists such a subject, but the intermediate conclusion implies that this is not something that anyone (Stroud included) could do. This objection is not very persuasive though. First, the Truth-Ascription Thesis, as Stroud understands it, is meant to apply to what an attributor must believe about the truth of an actual subject’s beliefs. Second, Brueckner’s criticism seems to involve an implicit but dubitable premise concerning the extent and nature of conception required for consistently believing that something is logically possible—or perhaps more importantly: of conception required for not being committed to the claim that something is not logically possible.
If the apparently innocent possibility from which the epistemological reasoning would begin is not a possibility anyone could consistently believe to be actual, it can be eliminated from serious consideration right at the beginning. (1999a, 156–157)

In order to explain why I find these inferences questionable, I want to sketch a hypothetical scenario that is analogous to the skeptical case. As will be apparent, the two cases are also disanalogous in some salient respects; however, none of these differences is ultimately significant for our purposes.

Imagine someone who worries a lot about the possibility of a global nuclear war. She worries especially about its happening sometime in her lifetime, or in her children’s or grandchildren’s lifetimes. To be specific, let us take as our possibility the possibility that a global nuclear war occurs sometime between the years 2020 and 2090. Now, imagine that it is a contingent fact about our brains that we could never come to believe that this possibility is actual. Suppose that whenever we even come close to believing that a global nuclear war will occur in those years, our brains undergo a severe chemical reaction or simply make us think about something else. Let us suppose that we can still think about this possibility, and understand it, and comprehend that it is a possibility; we simply cannot form the belief that the possibility is actual. Suppose that we could not even form the belief that there is a significant probability that such a war will happen; the most we could believe, say, is that there is a very small chance that it will happen but that most likely it will not.

The point, of course, is that if our brains did work this way, our subject would not be especially relieved were it explained to her that she could not come to believe that such a war will occur. The war could still happen. Furthermore, she could still acknowledge that the war could still happen, even if she simultaneously acknowledged that it is not something she could ever believe will happen. She could even see that the fact that she is unable ever to believe such a thing in no way makes such a war any less likely than she originally thought it was. She (and we) would still be able to entertain, and think about, and “take seriously,” this possibility. This possibility could still “pose a serious threat,” even if we knew we could never come to believe it is actual.  

It is true that acknowledging our inability might get us to stop investigating or debating whether there will be a war, for we could never conclude that there will be. But even such investigation might not be rendered pointless. For it might still be possible to discover, or prove, that the possibility in question is not actual (if indeed it was not) or that the war is even less likely than we had originally thought. These are conclusions that we could come to believe.

Of course, there are salient differences between the nuclear case and the skeptical case. In the nuclear case, for instance, our inability is clearly contingent, whereas in the skeptical

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11. In a different way, Hookway briefly touches upon a similar worry for Stroud’s argument (Hookway 1999, 178).
case it might not be. But why should this difference matter? In the skeptical case, what we are allegedly unable to take to be actual is still a logical possibility. Stroud would need to provide reason for thinking that inabilities that we have necessarily can help remove threats in a way that inabilities that we have contingently cannot. Or he would need to provide reason for thinking that it is a requirement upon producing a skeptical threat, in particular, that it is possible to have the ability to take the skeptical possibility to be actual. But why should we think this?

Another difference between the two cases is that the threats are dissimilar in structure. As Stroud understands the skeptic’s line of thinking, what we are purportedly threatened by is not the central possibility’s being actual, but rather our purported inability to show that we know that the possibility is not actual. What is threatened is our putative knowledge. The skeptical possibility could be not actual (and thus our beliefs largely true), and yet skepticism still be the case. And there are still further differences. However, I do not see how any of these differences could help explain why the inability in the skeptical case is enough to remove the threat in question whereas the inability in the nuclear war case is not.

My hypothetical scenario illustrates that it is at least not always the case that an inability to believe that a particular possibility is actual would help to eliminate a threat arising from consideration of that possibility. Stroud would need to provide reason for thinking that in the skeptical case it would. Prima facie at least, it seems it would not. There is thus a gap between Stroud’s claim that we could never take the skeptical possibility to be actual and his conclusion that we could never find ourselves confronted with, nor ever produce, a general challenge to our knowledge.

*Entertaining a Thought*

There is one passage in which Stroud may be attempting to fill this gap. He says there:

> If entertaining that possibility is a first but necessary step on the way to producing a general challenge to our putative knowledge that the world is that way, then we could never find ourselves confronted with such a challenge because we could never find that possibility to be realized. (1994a, 249)

And later on the same page, he adds,

> The most we would legitimately have established is that we cannot seriously entertain a certain thought from which a completely general scrutiny and hence a possibly threatening challenge to human knowledge might be thought to arise. There would so far be nothing on that horizon that even looks like a threat. (249–250)

According to Stroud, our inability to take the skeptical possibility to be actual suggests that we could never “entertain” or “seriously entertain” that possibility or that “thought.”
Stroud finds this significant, it seems, because he thinks that such entertaining is a necessary step toward producing a general challenge to our putative knowledge.

However, Stroud does not say precisely what he has in mind when he employs the notion of “entertaining” a particular possibility or thought. Certainly, in order to produce a skeptical challenge in the way Stroud envisions, one must be able to understand and think about the skeptical possibility. But doing this is something one can do even if one is unable to take the possibility to be actual. That one is unable to take the skeptical possibility to be actual does not imply that one cannot think about the skeptical possibility. Indeed, we do think about the skeptical possibility and thus we must be able to think about it.

Might Stroud mean, when he claims that we cannot entertain the skeptical possibility, that we cannot think about that possibility without at the same time being, in some sense, committed to the proposition that the possibility is not actual? This is not what “entertaining” a possibility typically connotes or requires. Regardless, if Stroud does mean this, it would then be dubitable that entertaining the skeptical possibility is indeed a necessary step for producing a general challenge to our knowledge.\(^12\)

Perhaps Stroud thinks that in order to raise a skeptical challenge one needs to be able not only to think about the skeptical possibility but to do so while at the same time believing that the skeptical possibility could be actual (in some sense stronger than logically), i.e., while at the same time believing that there is at least something of an open question as to whether it is actual. However, if this is what Stroud has in mind by “entertaining” the skeptical possibility, it is once again doubtful that entertaining the skeptical possibility is something the Truth-Ascription Thesis suggests we cannot do. It does not follow from the claim that we cannot consistently take the skeptical possibility to be actual that we cannot believe that there is something of an open question as to whether it is actual. Nor does the latter idea follow from the idea that we must take the beliefs under skeptical consideration to be largely true.

Stroud’s first way of explaining the antiskeptical significance of the Truth-Ascription Thesis would thus appear to depend upon a questionable assumption for which he provides little support: that it is a condition on producing a skeptical challenge that one is able to believe that the skeptical possibility is actual.\(^13\)

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12. I return to this issue in considerably more depth in section 3.

13. One might wonder whether Stroud’s argumentative intentions, in his first explanation of the implications of the Truth-Ascription Thesis, should not simply be interpreted as similar to those of P. F. Strawson in *Skepticism and Naturalism*. Strawson claims there that because “[w]e simply cannot help accepting” many of those beliefs that the skeptic would call into question, those beliefs are thus “not open to serious doubt. . . . The correct way with the professional skeptical doubt is not to attempt to rebut it with argument, but to point out that it is idle, unreal, a pretense” (Strawson 1985, 19–20). However, this “naturalist” line of thought does not underlie Stroud’s own inferences; Stroud explicitly distances himself from such approaches (see Stroud 1994a, 240–241).
Let me now turn to the second way in which Stroud explains the antiskeptical significance of the Truth-Ascription Thesis. I find this second way more promising than I do the first and will treat it in more depth. In this case, Stroud argues that in order for the general question concerning the truth of our beliefs to have the special “significance” and force that is the mark of the skeptic’s question, the question must be asked from a particular “position,” from a “disengaged position”—from a position “outside” of the body of beliefs in question (1999a, 157). Stroud intimates that the reason for this is that the support that the skeptic challenges us to provide is of a special kind. The skeptic challenges us to provide support for our beliefs that does not appeal to, or take for granted, the contents of any of the beliefs in question. He writes:

Skepticism is a negative verdict on a body of putative knowledge made in that sense from a position outside it; none of the very beliefs in question can be appealed to in making the assessment. The denial or negation of scepticism would accordingly be a positive verdict on that body of knowledge made from that same position outside it. It would share with the scepticism it opposes a common question and so a common standpoint from which the question is asked; they would differ only in the answers they give to that shared philosophical question. (157)

What the Truth-Ascription Thesis reveals, Stroud argues, is that this disengaged position is not one we could ever get ourselves into with respect to a set of beliefs we have identified for skeptical consideration. To identify the contents of an actual set of beliefs for skeptical consideration, we must take those beliefs to be largely true. The Truth-Ascription Thesis thus shows that “we could never intelligibly get ourselves into the kind of disengaged position from which the general epistemological question can be raised with its special significance and force” (157).

Stroud does not claim that we can never consistently ask about the truth of all of our beliefs and about whether they amount to knowledge. He thinks we can. But these questions can only be asked from a position “inside” of those beliefs, as it were. In responding to these questions (which Stroud calls “mundane” questions), we are allowed to appeal to some or all of the beliefs in question. What we cannot successfully

Stroud’s strategy is even further from the naturalist “skeptical solution” that Hume offers in An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, which also emphasizes an inability concerning what we can believe. Hume’s solution is “skeptical,” because it never abandons or denies the skeptical conclusion Hume draws at the end of section 4 of that book; the solution is provided in the face of that conclusion. On Stroud’s account, the appeal to our inability is made much earlier, before the skeptical conclusion can be drawn.
ask is the “the general epistemological question . . . with its special significance and force.” 14

Stroud’s second way of characterizing the antiskeptical significance of the Truth-Ascription Thesis might thus be expressed schematically as follows:

(TA): Belief attribution is in its nature largely truth-ascribing.
(P1): For the skeptical challenge to be raised appropriately, the skeptic’s question must be asked from a disengaged position with respect to the beliefs identified for skeptical consideration.
(P2): If belief attribution is in its nature largely truth-ascribing, then no one can get into a disengaged position with respect to a set of beliefs identified for skeptical consideration.
(C): The skeptical challenge cannot appropriately be raised.

The prospects of this argument depend crucially upon how the notion of a “disengaged position” is to be understood. What does it mean to say of someone that he is or is not in a disengaged position with respect to a particular set of beliefs? What does being in an engaged position amount to, or involve? Part of the difficulty in assessing Stroud’s line of thinking stems from the metaphorical nature of these notions. Stroud does not say much more than what he says in the quotation above.

I can conceive of at least three distinct ideas Stroud might have in mind when he employs the term “disengagement.” On some of them, (P1) is quite plausible; on others, (P2) is quite plausible. What proves difficult, I find, is to characterize a sense of disengagement on which we would be inclined to assent to both (P1) and (P2) at once. I will discuss each of these senses.

On the first sense of disengagement that I can conceive, which I will consider only briefly, being disengaged from a particular set of beliefs is simply a matter of having the ability to take that set of beliefs to be largely false. I doubt that this is in fact what Stroud has in mind when he speaks of disengagement, but if it is, then his second explanation of

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14. It is not clear from what Stroud says what he believes about actual attempts made by epistemologists (Descartes, for example) to raise questions about our knowledge—whether what these epistemologists succeed in doing is to raise merely a mundane question, or they do not successfully raise any question at all.

Stroud’s distinction between “mundane” or everyday questions and “special” or philosophical questions may call to mind recent contextualist approaches to skepticism (e.g., DeRose 1995). But these two antiskeptical strategies must be distinguished. First, Stroud makes no appeal to the requirements upon knowledge (or the conditions of application of the word “knows”) as varying according to context. For Stroud, what varies between the philosophical question and the ordinary question is what is required for one to ask the question. Second—and more importantly—on the contextualist approach, the skeptic (who is in a philosophical context) is correct in asserting that he does not know he has hands. The contextualist takes the philosophical question to be perfectly intelligible. There is no barrier to asking it appropriately (nor to answering it: he does not know). It is precisely because Stroud does not let the skeptic get so far that his approach is, in a way, much less skeptical.
the significance of the Truth-Ascription Thesis is ultimately no different from his first explanation of it, which I discussed in section 2. And so the worries I raised for the first explanation would apply to the second as well. In this case, Stroud would not have given us reason to accept (P1).

The second sense of disengagement, to which I will give the most attention, directly follows the little indication Stroud explicitly provides as to what he intends by “disengaged position.” Again, he writes, “Skepticism is a negative verdict on a body of putative knowledge made in that sense from a position outside it; none of the very beliefs in question can be appealed to in making the assessment” (157). This suggests that what Stroud may have in mind is something like the following: for one to be disengaged from a set of beliefs when undertaking a particular activity is for one to undertake that activity without ever “appealing to” any of the beliefs in that set.

On this sense of disengagement, my primary worry concerns once again (P1), that is, whether adopting a disengaged position is indeed required for raising the skeptical question. It is understandable of course why Stroud claims that assuming a disengaged position, on this sense, is required for answering the skeptical question. It is typically acknowledged that to appeal to the truth of the beliefs in question, in answering the skeptical challenge, would be to beg the question. But does the requirement concerning how one must go about answering the skeptic’s question extend to how the skeptic must go about asking it? It is not clear to me that it does.

Here too, I can conceive of three possibilities that are worth exploring, three reasons for which one might believe that adopting a disengaged position (on this second sense of “disengaged position”) is required for raising the skeptical challenge. Discussing these reasons will occupy me for much of the remainder of this section. In the end, none of these reasons proves compelling. However, I will not conclude from this that none of them could, in the end, be made effective. What I hope is that the questions I raise about them will prompt Stroud to say more about his reason(s) for believing (P1).

The first reason I will consider is that, in general, questions must be asked from the same “position” from which their answers must be given. I think it is unlikely that this is the principle on which Stroud infers (P1). It is a dubitable principle, and one Stroud never mentions. In fact, there may even be clear cases of questions that do not require the adoption of a disengaged position to be posed yet that do require the adoption of a disengaged position to be answered. For example, an individual thinker can certainly ask about the truth of one of his own beliefs. I believe that it is raining in New York because I heard a weather report yesterday saying that it would storm there today. But I can still wonder, or ask, whether it is indeed raining there, whether my belief is true, whether the weather report yesterday was correct. In order to ask this question, though, I need to believe that I have this belief. And in order to believe that I have this belief, I at some point in my reflection have to think or believe that it is raining. Raising a question about the truth of my belief requires that I am engaged with that belief. But clearly it is a requirement on my answering such a question that I am disengaged from the belief, that in answering the question I do not appeal to its truth.
It might be too hasty, though, to conclude that this case truly involves an instance of a question that does not require the adoption of a disengaged position to be posed yet that does require the adoption of a disengaged position to be answered. Perhaps Stroud would reply that it is true that in asking whether my belief that it is raining in New York is true I need to believe that it is raining in New York, but that this does not imply that in asking that question I must appeal to the truth of that belief. The process whereby I attribute to myself the belief that it is raining in New York and then ask about its truth does not, he might say, involve the premise that it is raining in New York. There is a difference between possessing a belief, on the one hand, and appealing to its truth, or employing the belief, in a particular line of thinking, on the other. What is required for answering a question about the truth of one’s own belief that it is raining in New York is that in answering it one does not appeal to, or rely on, the truth of that belief. And so this case, in which I ask about the truth of a particular one of my beliefs, may not constitute an instance in which answering a particular question requires the adoption of a disengaged position but asking that question does not, because it is not clear that I do not in fact adopt a disengaged position when asking such a question.

If that is how Stroud would respond, though, he would now face a different question. If I truly can and do adopt a disengaged position when asking about the truth of a particular one of my beliefs, why then can I not do the same with respect to most or all of my beliefs? That is, why then should we believe (P2)?

Stroud may have a plausible answer to this question as well, which would derive from his views about our knowledge of our own mental states. According to Stroud, a subject’s awareness of the contents of his own beliefs (i.e., of what he believes) is much more complicated and involved than has traditionally been thought. He writes,

[T]here has been a tendency to assume that there really is no difficulty about this: that each of us somehow simply recognizes in ourselves what thoughts or experiences we are undergoing at any particular time, and that when we think of the mental life of others we think of them as having the same sorts of things as we know we have…. I will take it for granted that [this way of conceiving mental phenomena] does not work. (1994a, 242)

What does Stroud think is involved in an individual’s attributing to himself a particular mental state? He argues that an individual’s ability to become aware of his own mental states requires, among other things, that he has made a great many judgments about non-mental matters. For instance, in order for me to be able to attribute to myself an experience of yellow, Stroud claims, I must already have made many judgments about the colors of material objects (judgments such as that the lemon on the table is yellow). Stroud appears

to endorse many aspects of Davidson’s conception of the “three varieties of knowledge,” according to which, among other things, awareness or knowledge of one’s own mind requires awareness or knowledge of the external world.16 Perhaps it is plausible, on such an account of self-knowledge, to suppose that the process by which one comes to be able to consider most or all of one’s own beliefs for skeptical consideration does involve one’s at some point relying on or “appealing to” the contents of many of those beliefs.

I will not attempt to sharpen this idea, nor to assess Stroud’s reasons for endorsing it, if he does. The important point for our purposes is that we can perhaps see why an epistemologist might hold that, while it is possible for someone to adopt a disengaged position when attributing to himself and subsequently questioning the truth of an individual belief, it is not possible for someone to adopt a disengaged position when attributing to himself and subsequently questioning the truth of most or all of his beliefs. Perhaps the process by which one comes to be able to attribute to oneself an individual belief does not typically require his ever relying on or appealing to the content of that particular belief. At least, let us grant some such explanation for the sake of argument.

What then of the first of the three reasons I am considering for believing that disengagement (on the second of the three senses of disengagement) is required for raising the skeptical challenge? That reason, again, is that, in general, questions must be asked from the same “position” from which their answers must be given. If we grant Stroud the responses above, we have not yet seen reason to deny such a principle. But nor have we seen reason to accept it, and there is reason to be suspicious of it. Consider the following case. The only way for me to know how I will feel if I take this pill right now is to take the pill. The question—*How will I feel if I take this pill right now?*—can be answered only from the “position” of having taken the pill. But I do not need to have taken the pill, that is, to have adopted that “position,” in order to ask, or to wonder, how I will feel if I take the pill right now. Of course, the notion of “position” here may be different from the notion Stroud is employing, as may be the force or modality of the requirement of disengagement. But the case suffices to make us wonder why we should believe that, in general, questions must be asked from the same position (in whatever sense Stroud has in mind) as that from which their answers must be given. If Stroud is relying on a principle such as this, he would need to support it. And perhaps he can. That is one reason I say that I am more optimistic about Stroud’s second way of explaining the significance of the Truth-Ascription Thesis than I am about the first.

Stroud and the Error Theorist about Color

Allow me to move on to the second and third reasons one might provide for (P1), on the second sense of disengagement. The second reason I will consider for believing that disengagement is required for raising the skeptical challenge is that appealing to the truth

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of the identified beliefs while raising the skeptical question would ultimately render the skeptic unable to fulfill his project, on account of consistency. It will be helpful here to introduce an argument Stroud has advanced elsewhere against error theories of color (2000, chap. 7). I introduce Stroud’s views on color at this juncture because attention to a subtle difference between Stroud’s targets in the two cases will help, first, to convey what I have in mind by the second reason, and second, and more importantly, to reveal why this reason would be ineffective. Discussing Stroud’s argument against the error theorist about color has an additional benefit. His argument against the error theorist is remarkably similar to the version of his argument against the skeptic that I discussed in section 2, and so it might be thought that an appreciation of the former might help us to see the latter in a more positive light. Unfortunately, I do not think that it does. Understanding why it does not will place us in a better position to assess the line of thought that I have been attributing to Stroud concerning disengagement and the raising of the skeptical question.

The error theorist about color argues that our ordinary judgments ascribing colors to material objects are all false; no material object has any color at all. As Stroud understands her, the error theorist proposes that everything that is the case, including the fact that objects appear to us to have color, is best explained without ever supposing that objects do in fact have color. The error theorist’s goal is to expose as false our many beliefs about the colors of objects by explaining the source of those beliefs in a way that never attributes color to objects. The appeal of this view stems from the common thought that such explanations are strongly suggested by our present scientific conception of the world.¹⁷

Central to Stroud’s argument against the error theory is once again the idea that a particular possibility is not one we could ever consistently take to be actual. In this case, the relevant possibility is that people have many beliefs about the colors of objects, and those beliefs are all false. That is a possibility that the error theorist’s project requires that the error theorist be able to take to be actual. In order to conclude that people’s judgments in which colors are ascribed to material objects are all false, the error theorist must believe that people make such judgments. Stroud’s fundamental claim is that one could not believe that people have beliefs in which colors are ascribed to material objects if one did not oneself believe that material objects have color. One could thus not consistently take to be actual the possibility that people believe that objects have color and objects do not have color. Hence, Stroud compares the relation in which the error theorist stands to this possibility to the relation in which one stands to Moore’s paradoxical sentence, “I believe that it is raining, and it is not raining.” While the possibility could be actual, the error theorist cannot consistently argue that it is actual.

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¹⁷. Galileo held an error theory, as on some interpretations did Descartes and Locke. For some influential contemporary versions, see Boghossian and Velleman 1989 and Hardin 1993.
Skepticism and Knowledge

Stroud’s arguments for the claim that one could not consistently believe both that people have color beliefs and that objects do not have color are complex. 18 I will not go into them here. What is most relevant is that, in the color case, it is clear why establishing that no one could take the identified possibility to be actual would undermine the project in question. A consistent explanation of the sort the error theorist desires would not be possible. And with the promised explanation unavailable, the error theory loses its appeal. The potential fulfillment of the error theorist’s project—to explain everything that is the case without attributing color to objects—was precisely what threatened the truth of our ordinary color judgments. Stroud does not aspire to demonstrate that objects do have color; he aspires only to reveal that the line of thinking that may have seemed to suggest that objects do not have color is ultimately unavailable.

In the skeptical case, however, the project is of an importantly different sort. It is not that in the skeptical case there is no corresponding project the potential fulfillment of which threatens the truth of most or all of our beliefs. As Stroud understands the way in which the skeptical threat purportedly gets generated, there is. The project is to show that we cannot prove (or provide good reason for believing) that the possibility in question—that most or all of our beliefs are false—is not actual. What is crucially different between the color case and the skeptical case, though, is that the skeptic’s project does not (at least not clearly) ever involve claiming that the beliefs concerned in the possibility in question are largely false. The error theorist’s project does. The error theorist’s project is to explain everything that is the case while at the same time maintaining that objects do not have color, that our beliefs ascribing colors to objects are systematically false. The skeptic’s project, on the other hand, does not essentially involve claiming that the beliefs under consideration are largely false; it involves claiming only that his subject cannot prove (or provide good reason for believing) that they are largely true. The skeptic need not claim that the possibility in question is actual. Indeed, he might well believe that it is not.

The fact that nowhere must the skeptic claim that the beliefs in question are false is important, because the central problem with the error theorist’s project, as Stroud understands it, is that there is something that the error theorist needs to believe in order to carry out her project—namely, that objects have color—that is inconsistent with the error theorist’s claim that the beliefs in question are false. The problem for the error theorist is that she aspires to deny the truth of a set of beliefs that she at a prior juncture needs to affirm. That is why the error theorist’s inability to take the possibility in question to be actual is important: she must do so.

In the skeptical case, what is threatened is our knowledge. And what threatens it is our purported inability to prove (or to provide good reason for thinking) that the possibility in question—that most or all of our beliefs are false—is not actual. The possibility itself

does not have to be actual for skepticism to be true; most of our beliefs could be true and yet still we not have knowledge or good reason to believe the things we do. Nor—and this is the crucial point—does the skeptic need to claim that the possibility is actual. The general strategy Stroud takes against the error theorist about color thus cannot be applied in the same way against the global skeptic. The threats are dissimilar in structure.

Doubting the Skeptic’s Attributions

My look at Stroud’s arguments about color was meant to do two things: (1) to show that Stroud’s argument against the skeptic does not receive sufficient help from his argument against the error theorist; and (2) to help us to assess the second potential reason for believing that the process through which the skeptic or the skeptic’s subject raises (or becomes able to raise) the question with “special significance and force” must at no point involve his relying on or appealing to the truth of the beliefs under consideration. Let us return to (2). That reason, again, is that appealing to the truth of the identified beliefs while raising the skeptical question would ultimately render the skeptic unable to fulfill his project, on account of consistency. It is clearly true that one cannot appeal to the truth of a particular proposition and then, at a later juncture, consistently claim that the proposition is false. However, what the juxtaposition of the color case and the skeptical case brings out is that this is not something the skeptic needs to do. If the skeptic cannot successfully raise his question, it is not because raising that question commits him to a proposition that he must later contradict. Thus, the second of the three reasons we are considering on behalf of (P1) is inadequate.

The relevant issue, it seems, is whether it is illegitimate or somehow not fully proper for one to appeal to the truth of a particular proposition or propositions and then, at a later juncture, merely question whether that proposition or those propositions are indeed true. Prima facie, it would seem that it is not illegitimate—or at least, not generally. And Stroud gives us no reason for thinking that it is. However, allow me to consider one reason for which it might be thought that, in the special case of skepticism, it is problematic to do this. This is the third and final way I will consider of supporting (P1) on the second sense of disengagement.

The third way would depend upon continuing to grant Stroud a conception of self-knowledge according to which attributing to oneself an entire set of beliefs requires that one has at some point relied on or appealed to the truth of many of those beliefs. If such a conception of self-knowledge is correct, then it may be that in questioning or doubting the truth of one’s own beliefs, one thereby questions or doubts the very belief attributions one initially made to oneself; that is, one thereby questions or doubts whether one even has the beliefs the truth of which one is purportedly questioning.

Would questioning or calling into doubt one’s initial attributions to oneself be a problematic consequence for the skeptic? There may be at least one kind of skeptic for whom it is. One traditional sort of epistemologist begins his potentially skeptical line of inquiry
by assuming self-knowledge. Descartes, for example, begins by assuming that he has knowledge of the contents of his own beliefs; at the very least, he knows what he believes. He knows, for instance, that he believes that he has hands, eyes, flesh, blood, and senses. His challenge to himself is to show that he can be certain that these beliefs are true. Calling into question whether one even has the beliefs one believes one has might be thought to be detrimental to any skeptic who, like Descartes, begins by—and never stops—assuming self-knowledge.

However, calling into doubt one’s initial attributions is a consequence of calling into doubt the truth of one’s own beliefs (about the external world, say) only on a conception of self-knowledge of the sort we are, for the sake of argument, granting Stroud. That conception of self-knowledge, again, holds that a subject’s ability to attribute to himself his entire set of beliefs depends crucially upon his at some point having relied on or appealed to the truth of many of those beliefs. Recall, attributing such a conception of self-knowledge to Stroud was the only way we could make sense of the idea that, even though an individual can adopt a disengaged position with respect to a particular belief he takes himself to have, he cannot do so with respect to all of the beliefs he takes himself to have. But traditional epistemologists, such as Descartes, do not go along with this conception of self-knowledge. On their conception of self-knowledge, calling into doubt the truth of one’s own beliefs (about the external world) would not have the consequence of calling into doubt one’s initial attributions to oneself.

Allow me to mention one final possibility though, a potential reason that even a skeptic who endorses the conception of self-knowledge I am granting Stroud might find this consequence problematic. Perhaps it could be argued that a philosopher who produces an argument that raises questions about, or calls into doubt, the contents of his own beliefs would thereby, in some cases, raise no less substantial questions about what it is that he is even thinking or saying when he advances that very argument. If so, it might be as if the skeptic would be led to say: “I do not know (or I doubt) that what I have just thought or argued is what I believe I have just thought or argued, yet still, I have just offered a very persuasive line of reasoning that shows that skepticism is true.” The question would then be whether one could sincerely assert the latter part of this sentence if one truly believed the former part. Perhaps there is antiskeptical promise in pursuing this idea; it is difficult to say. I will not pursue it further here, though, as there is no indication that anything like this is the reason for which Stroud endorses (P1). But it may be, and it may be worth investigating.

A Third Sense of “Disengagement”: Suspension of Belief

I have been questioning whether there is a sense of disengagement such that (P1) and (P2) are both true—that disengagement is required to raise a skeptical challenge, and that the Truth-Ascription Thesis entails that no one can get into a disengaged position with respect to a set of beliefs identified for skeptical consideration. On the first two senses of
disengagement we have considered, I primarily raised doubts about the truth of (P1). There is a third sense of disengagement though—the most natural one, perhaps—according to which (P1) may well be true. However, on this sense (P2) is questionable.

When one raises the skeptical question of oneself (i.e., about one’s own beliefs), what one typically does (or tries to do) is somehow to “step back” from his beliefs and, knowing full well that he takes them to be true, to consider them in as unbiased and “objective” a way as he can. In considering them, he suspends judgment as to their truth to the best of his ability. That is a sort of disengagement that perhaps is required to raise a skeptical challenge to oneself. It is a sense of disengagement on which (P1) may be correct.

In order to assess Stroud’s argument on this third sense of disengagement, it will be helpful to express Stroud’s second explanation of the significance of the Truth-Ascription Thesis in a slightly different way, as follows:

1. For the skeptical challenge to be raised appropriately, the skeptic’s question must be asked from a disengaged position with respect to the set of beliefs identified for skeptical consideration.
2. One must take a set of beliefs identified for skeptical consideration to be largely true.
3. One cannot get into a disengaged position with respect to a set of beliefs that one must (in order to identify them for consideration) take to be largely true.

(C) The skeptical challenge cannot appropriately be raised.

(1) is (P1), (2) is (essentially) the Truth-Ascription Thesis. And (P2) is (essentially) the claim that (2) implies (3).

On the sense of disengagement we are considering, (3) is what is most questionable. Indeed, “stepping back” from one’s beliefs, as it were, and considering them in as unbiased and “objective” a way as one can (all the while knowing full well that one takes them to be true) is precisely, I presume, what those of us who have (purportedly) raised the skeptical challenge to ourselves have taken ourselves to have done. We considered our own beliefs, which we knew we took to be true, and we tried to disengage from them for the sake of the philosophical inquiry. And so the idea that we have not done such a thing—indeed cannot do such a thing—would require significant support, support Stroud does not appear to provide. Prima facie, it would seem that, on the third sense of disengagement, (3) does not follow from (2), that is, from the Truth-Ascription Thesis. Indeed, that is essentially what we saw in our discussion in section 2 of Stroud’s proposal that we cannot seriously “entertain” the skeptical possibility. As I explained, if we understand “entertaining” the skeptical possibility to be a matter of believing that it is at least something of an open question whether this possibility is actual, there is no clear reason to believe that the Truth-Ascription Thesis suggests that entertaining the skeptical possibility is not something we can do. For similar reasons, the Truth-Ascription Thesis would
not appear to suggest that “stepping back” from one’s beliefs and considering them in as unbiased and “objective” a way as one can (all the while knowing full well that one takes them to be true) is not something we can do.

It is worth mentioning as well that there is reason to believe that this third sense of disengagement is not in fact the sense Stroud is employing anyway. That is because, on the third sense, it would be less understandable (at least than on the second sense) why Stroud places as much emphasis as he does on the Truth-Ascription Thesis. On the second sense of disengagement, it is understandable why Stroud might find such significance in that thesis, even if (Pt) would still be dubitable: the Truth-Ascription Thesis (perhaps as rooted in Stroud’s conception of self-knowledge) might indeed reveal that one cannot get into a disengaged position (again, on the second sense) with respect to a set of beliefs that one has identified for skeptical consideration. But on the third sense, the thesis would seem to have less significance. Not (2) but (3) would be the substantial premise. I mention this not to provide a second concern about (3), but to explain why it is perhaps unlikely that the third sense of disengagement is the one Stroud has in mind anyway.

4. INSENSITIVITY AND THE REQUIREMENT OF DISENGAGEMENT

I have argued that neither of Stroud’s two explanations of the antiskeptical significance of the Truth-Ascription Thesis is compelling. Rather than explore Stroud’s arguments further, I want to propose a different argument against the skeptic, one that follows Stroud’s lead in significant respects.

Stroud is certainly correct that, if it could be shown that the skeptical challenge cannot be raised, this would be a large advance against the would-be skeptic. If the skeptic’s line of thinking is truly “not fully valid” or “not even fully coherent” (1989, 49), then there would be no challenge to our knowledge about which to worry. Nor could we worry about any inability of ours to answer such a challenge. No legitimate challenge would have been identified.

To undermine the skeptic’s project in this way, though, would not be to show that skepticism is false. On Stroud’s theory in particular, that would be because

to adopt a more positive theory of knowledge instead is still to offer a description of the human condition from that same special position or point of view. If we cannot get into that position and see that scepticism is true, can we be sure that we can get into it and see that scepticism is false? (1994a, 294)

In this respect, Stroud distinguishes his strategy from the strategy he attributes to Kant, which he thinks is also significantly similar to his own. Like Kant, Stroud considers what makes possible, or what conditions are necessary for, people’s even having the thoughts and experiences that any epistemologist’s investigation into human knowledge must at
the beginning take her subjects to have. What is found to be a necessary condition upon human beings having thoughts and experiences of a certain kind can be taken to be “invulnerable” to doubt, as Stroud says, by any inquirer who starts by (and never stops) taking her subjects to have just those thoughts and experiences.

The thoughts the conditions on which Stroud himself emphasizes are of a very particular kind. Stroud focuses on the conditions on human beings conceiving of themselves and others as having thoughts and experiences with determinate contents. That is an issue concerning thought about the psychology or mental makeup of human beings. What conditions must be fulfilled for us to be able to think of ourselves and others as having particular thoughts and experiences? Focusing upon that question could have implications for epistemology, since any investigation into the nature of human knowledge involves understanding human beings as having thoughts and experiences. And so what is taken by the epistemologist to be necessary for such understanding would seem “invulnerable” to any investigator’s doubt.

But the conditions Stroud identifies are of quite a different kind from the conditions Stroud believes Kant identifies. On Stroud’s interpretation of Kant, Kant concludes that the world, as it is “non-psychologically, independently of us,” as Stroud says, must be a certain way in order for human beings to have the thoughts and experiences Kant takes human beings to have (243). Stroud understands Kant to conclude from the fact that human beings have the thoughts and experiences they do that the world, as it is “non-psychologically, independently of us,” is, in general, as those thoughts and experiences depict it to be.19

Stroud himself, however, does not intend to identify conditions upon thought and experience that concern how the world must be “non-psychologically, independently of” human beings. He is pessimistic about the prospects of ever doing so. What can be discovered, he thinks, are conditions concerning only how human beings must think and believe. In particular, Stroud believes there are “ways in which we must believe things to be non-psychologically, or independently of us” (243) in order for us to be able to attribute to people thoughts and experiences with determinate contents. He finds promise in the project P. F. Strawson pursues under the name of “connective analysis” (Strawson 1985, 25), which Stroud himself considers to be a matter of “carefully restrict[ing] ourselves to necessary links among our ways of thinking themselves, without venturing beyond” (1994a, 242) what Strawson calls “a certain sort of interdependence of conceptual capacities and beliefs” (1985, 21).

One such connection to be discovered among the different parts of our thought, Stroud argues, is that it is a condition on attributing to another an entire set of beliefs that one believes that the beliefs in that set are largely true. That is the Truth-Ascription

19. Not all interpreters share Stroud’s reading of Kant on this matter; however, the distinction Stroud makes here, between two kinds of conditions, is important to underscore regardless of its relation to Kant.
Thesis. That thesis still involves only a condition concerning how we must think of the world as being and not one about how the world must in fact be (nonpsychologically, or independently of us). But still, Stroud maintains, it has antiskeptical consequences.

That last conviction underscores the significant sense in which Stroud believes his approach is importantly non-Kantian. Stroud believes that he diverges from Kant in his (Stroud’s) denial that in order to disarm the skeptic, we must at some point produce “positive metaphysical results” (Stroud 1994a, 240), or “positive non-psychological conclusions as to how things are” (1994a, 240). Stroud does not believe that in order to disarm the skeptic, the “propositions which [scepticism] would challenge” must be “positively proved by transcendental means, and so put out of harm’s way” (240). As Stroud explains, the considerations he appeals to suggest little about—let alone prove—how the world is nonpsychologically or independently of us.

That is the sense in which Stroud’s argument is a “modest” one. It is “transcendental” insofar as it aims to remove the threat of skepticism by appealing to the necessary conditions upon a certain form of thought. It is modest because it does so without ever attempting to demonstrate that our beliefs are largely true. A successful, modest antiskeptical argument would not prove to us that (say) the standard brain-in-the-vat scenario is not true of us. It would show only that we cannot consistently or justifiably think about such a scenario in a way that threatens our knowledge: we would only have been appearing to ourselves to think in such a way. No legitimate challenge or threat would have been raised to our knowledge.

I want to conclude by proposing a modest antiskeptical argument that is similar to Stroud’s in broad strokes. Like Stroud’s strategy, mine is to achieve a similarly modest but powerful antiskeptical conclusion, and to do so by showing that an early step in the skeptic’s line of thinking, one that often goes unscrutinized, is ultimately unavailable. And, as on Stroud’s approach, what is to reveal this unavailability is close attention to the relation between the epistemic position of the skeptic’s subject, on the one hand, and a requirement of a kind of disengagement, on the other.

One issue worth exploring, I believe, involves the order in which particular considerations are provided in the construction of the skeptical argument. It may be that something that is required at a certain juncture in the skeptic’s line of thinking is not in fact available at that point. And it may be that the reason the skeptic (and we) typically believe it is available is that it would be available if the skeptical challenge had already been appropriately raised. But if mounting the challenge requires a move that is available only once the challenge has been mounted, then the challenge cannot ever be raised. Let me explain.

Some of the most powerful skeptical arguments proceed by appeal to one or another “skeptical hypothesis,” for instance, the hypothesis that I am a brain in a vat systematically deceived by scientists.  

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20. For a discussion of the role skeptical hypotheses play in the construction of skeptical arguments, see DeRose 1999.
of the experiences and beliefs that he has but they are largely false (or nonveridical). The skeptic argues that if the subject cannot prove or provide good reason for believing that the skeptical hypothesis in question is not true, then those of the subject’s beliefs that, on the skeptical hypothesis, are false do not constitute knowledge; nor does the subject even have good reason to believe they are true: the truth of those beliefs, after all, is incompatible with the truth of the skeptical hypothesis, and so if one does not have good reason to believe that the skeptical hypothesis is not true, one does not have good reason to believe that those beliefs are true. The skeptic then attempts to convince his subject that, indeed, his subject cannot prove or provide good reason for believing that the skeptical hypothesis is not true.\(^{21}\)

Now, one methodological point or premise that the subject needs to grant in order for the skeptic’s argument to be effective is that in proving or providing good reason for believing that the skeptical hypothesis is not true, the subject cannot simply appeal to, or rely on, any of his experiences or beliefs that on the skeptical hypothesis is nonveridical. He cannot fulfill the requirement that he prove or provide good reason to believe that he is not a brain in a vat (say) by saying, “Because, look! Here is a table, there you are, here are my hands!” If the subject were allowed to appeal to, or rely on, these experiences and beliefs, then he would be able to provide good reason for thinking that the skeptical hypothesis is not true, and the skeptical conclusion would be avoided. And indeed, much of the power of skeptical arguments comes from the force of the idea that of course the subject is not allowed to appeal to, or rely on, such experiences and beliefs in proving or providing good reason to believe that a particular skeptical hypothesis is not true of him. To do so, it seems clear, would be to beg the question, or to commit some other, equally problematic logical fallacy. In the remainder of the chapter, however, I want to question whether the subject’s epistemic relation to the crucial methodological premise is in fact what we typically suppose it is. Do the norms of intellectual reason truly force the subject to accept this premise? Does the subject even have justification to accept it? I will argue that the answer to these questions may in fact be no, and that there is antiskeptical promise in pursuing them beyond this chapter.\(^{22}\)

Our granting that we, as subjects, are not allowed to appeal to any of the beliefs or experiences that on the skeptic’s hypothesis are nonveridical is a result of particular features of the skeptical hypothesis. We might distinguish two important things that the skeptic’s introduction of a skeptical hypothesis is supposed to accomplish. The first I have

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21. Some epistemologists characterize the skeptic’s argument as challenging the possibility of knowledge only, and not also the possibility of (perceptual) justification or good reason. I will follow Stroud in conceiving of it as concerning both (Stroud 1984). See Pryor 2000 for a discussion of why this approach is preferable.

22. Some interpreters believe that providing a negative answer to one or both of these questions is precisely what G. E. Moore was trying to do when he said, “Here is one hand, and here is another,” while making a certain gesture with each hand. If so, the considerations and arguments that I advance in support of the negative answers are of a different sort than what Moore offers, as will become clear.
already mentioned: it provides the very hypothesis that the subject is allegedly required to prove or provide good reason for believing is not true—it provides the hypothesis that the subject agrees he must know or have good reason to believe is not true if he is to know or have good reason to believe many of the things he thinks he knows. However, not only does the introduction of the sceptical hypothesis provide the subject’s target—what he needs to prove or provide good reason for thinking is not true—but it also, secondly, limits the way in which he is allowed to do this. The subject is not allowed to appeal to, or rely on, any of the experiences and beliefs that he in fact has that, if the sceptical hypothesis were true, he would have but would be false. Those experiences and beliefs (such as the subject’s belief that he has hands) are “insensitive” to their truth values (Nozick 1981), with respect to the sceptical hypothesis: the subject would have those experiences and beliefs whether they are largely true or the sceptical hypothesis is true and they are largely false. It is largely that—the fact that if the sceptical hypothesis were true the subject would have those experiences and beliefs but they would be largely false, that is, the insensitivity of those experiences and beliefs—that moves the uninitiated subject, upon first hearing the sceptical line of reasoning, to grant that he must not appeal to, or rely on, any such experiences or beliefs in his proof or provision of good reason to believe that the sceptical hypothesis is not true. Because of how the sceptical hypothesis is constructed, that amounts to the great majority of a subject’s experiences and most basic beliefs.

Let us call what the subject acknowledges here Insensitivity:

This hypothesis is such that if the hypothesis were true I would hold all of the experiences and beliefs that the skeptic is challenging, yet they would be largely false.

The skeptic intends for the subject’s acknowledgment of Insensitivity ultimately to have the effect that the subject concludes Independence:

In order for this hypothesis not to pose a significant threat to my knowledge of the things these beliefs are about, I must without appealing to, or relying on, any of those experiences or beliefs be able to prove, or provide good reason for believing, that the hypothesis is not true.

(I call this Independence because what is required is that the justification provided be independent of those experiences and beliefs that are insensitive with respect to the sceptical possibility.) The inference from Insensitivity to Independence is one that is typically granted to the skeptic without much scrutiny, on account of its apparent obviousness. But it is worth exploring in depth what it is that is supposed to ground this inference. Precisely why do we so quickly grant it to the skeptic? Is the conditional If Insensitivity, then Independence analytically true? Does it follow from the concept of knowledge? Or is it based on some further epistemic principle? If the latter, what is that principle, and does the subject at this juncture have justification to believe it?
I will argue that in fact the norms of intellectual reason do not force the subject to infer Independence from Insensitivity; indeed, that they do not even provide the subject with justification for making this inference. In the battle with the skeptic, this may be the step that is to be resisted. After presenting my argument, I will explain why we, as subjects, typically grant the skeptic the inference, why Independence strikes us as so obviously following from Insensitivity.

My strategy in the remainder is as follows. First, I will look at two potential epistemic principles that might be thought to ground the conditional If Insensitivity, then Independence (hereafter, “the Conditional”) and argue that these principles do not help. I will then argue that the Conditional is in fact false; not only does the subject not have clear justification for believing it, but it is not true. I propose that the subject does not have justification for inferring Independence at all, and that the threat of skepticism can thus not be raised (at least not by way of the standard appeal to skeptical hypotheses). I then consider and reply to four potential objections to this conclusion. Three of the four apply to my argument that the Conditional is false; the fourth attempts to identify a different source of the subject’s justification for believing in Independence. The force of my argument, I believe, rests largely on the surprising ineffectiveness of these four objections.

Before I do any of this, though, I want to remind my reader of the subject’s epistemic position when he is first presented with the skeptical hypothesis. In order for the skeptic’s subject to understand what hypothesis the skeptic has in mind—that he himself is a brain in a vat being systematically deceived by clever scientists, say—the subject must think of himself as in fact having some set of experiences and beliefs. He must think of himself as having all of the experiences and beliefs he in fact has (or believes he has), i.e., all of those experiences and beliefs that he would also have if the skeptical hypothesis were true. But the contents of those beliefs—that is, what he believes—are largely inconsistent with the skeptical hypothesis. When the skeptical hypothesis is first described to the subject, before there is any mention of insensitivity, the subject may well be able to grant that the hypothesis is “logically possible,” but he would believe, at that juncture, that of course the hypothesis is not true. The question is what he is then justified in concluding once it is pointed out to him—or he realizes on his own—that the experiences and beliefs he in fact has (or believes he has) are insensitive with respect to the skeptical hypothesis just introduced.

Consider the following interaction that an uninitiated subject might have with the skeptic. Ultimately, I want to provide reasons for thinking that the subject’s replies in the following interaction are not as unjustified or illegitimate as they will initially strike many readers.

skeptic: Consider that you have all the experiences and beliefs that you do but that really you’re a brain in a vat being deceived by clever, malevolent neuroscientists.
SUBJECT: Okay.
SKEPTIC: You admit that’s a logical possibility?
SUBJECT: Yes, of course, it’s logically possible. It’s not actual, though.
SKEPTIC: Well, before you conclude that it’s not actual, do you agree that, if this logical possibility were actual, you’d have all the experiences and beliefs that you actually have, and still you’d be thinking that the logical possibility is not actual?
SUBJECT: Yes, I agree.
SKEPTIC: So then how do you know that the logical possibility is not actual?
SUBJECT: Because it’s not.
SKEPTIC: But why do you say that?
SUBJECT: Because I’m really here. Here’s my body. There you are. Are you kidding?
SKEPTIC: But you can’t help yourself to your beliefs that you’re really here, that that’s your body, and so on, in telling me how you know you’re not really a brain in a vat, because you would have all of those beliefs even if you were a brain in a vat.
SUBJECT: But those beliefs are true. I’m not a brain in a vat.
SKEPTIC: Perhaps they are true, but you’re begging the question to assume them in explaining to me how it is you know that the logical possibility is not actual.
SUBJECT: How so? Why can I not appeal to them?
SKEPTIC: Because you’d have all of those beliefs even if the logical possibility were actual.
SUBJECT: But it’s not actual!
SKEPTIC: But you can’t just assume that the logical possibility is not actual. That’s what’s in question.
SUBJECT: Why do you say it’s in question?
SKEPTIC: Because that’s what we’re talking about—whether it’s actual.
SUBJECT: Well, I said at the beginning that it’s a logical possibility but that it’s not actual. You haven’t given me any reason to think it’s actual.
SKEPTIC: But I showed you that, if it were actual, you’d be reasoning in just the same way.
SUBJECT: Yes, I would. But it’s not. So that fact is irrelevant.

A natural reaction to the subject’s reasoning here is to think that he is simply being obtuse, that he is not appreciating the truth of the Conditional, that is, If Insensitivity, then Independence. Let us return to our question then: Is the Conditional in fact true? What justification is there for believing it?

One might propose that the Conditional follows from, or is grounded in, some true, general epistemic principle such as the following:

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In order to know (or have good reason to believe) that $P$, that $Q$, that $R$, and so on, one must know (or have good reason to believe) that no hypothesis with respect to which one’s beliefs that $P$, that $Q$, that $R$, and so on, are insensitive is true.

Even if this principle is true, and we have justification for believing it, whether it grounds or justifies the Conditional depends upon what is required to know (or have good reason to believe) that no hypothesis with respect to which one’s beliefs that $P$, that $Q$, that $R$, and so on, are insensitive is true. After all, one might agree with this principle yet deny that, in order to know (or have good reason to believe) that no hypothesis with respect to which one’s beliefs that $P$, that $Q$, that $R$, and so on, are insensitive is true, one must be able to prove (or provide good reason to believe) that no such hypothesis is true without appealing to, or relying on, any of one’s beliefs that $P$, that $Q$, that $R$, and so on. Consider the subject in the dialogue above. He appears to agree that in order for the beliefs that the skeptic challenges to amount to knowledge he must know (or have good reason to believe) that the hypothesis introduced is not true. He believes he does know (or does have good reason to believe) that that hypothesis is not true. Of course, the subject’s reasoning that he knows this may well be incorrect; whether it is, though, is precisely what we are investigating. That would need to be settled before we could say whether the principle above grounds the Conditional.

That is, one might propose the following principle instead:

In order to know (or have good reason to believe) that $P$, that $Q$, that $R$, and so on, one must know (or have good reason to believe) that no hypothesis with respect to which one’s beliefs that $P$, that $Q$, that $R$, and so on, are insensitive is true, where this knowledge (or good reason) does not depend upon any of one’s beliefs that $p$, that $q$, that $r$, and so on.

The problem with this principle is not that it is not true. Perhaps it is. The problem, for our purposes, is that a principle like this is precisely what we are looking for support for. Introducing this principle does not yet provide satisfactory justification for the Conditional; it merely pushes the question back a step: Is this principle true? What justification is there for believing it?

Of course nothing I have said so far at all suggests that there is not justification for believing the Conditional, or that the Conditional is not analytically true. Rather than looking further, though, for justification for believing the Conditional, or for possible reasons to think that the Conditional is analytically true, I want now to offer an argument that the Conditional is in fact false. Insensitivity does not entail Independence, neither logically or conceptually, nor by way of any justified general epistemic principle.

In order to explain why I say this, we must first remind ourselves of some of the sorts of skeptical hypothesis that are typically appealed to by the skeptic. I will mention three, though there are certainly others. There is of course, first, the skeptical hypothesis made...
most famous by Descartes that—you are dreaming, and your present experiences and perceptual beliefs are all or largely false. There is, second, the skeptical hypothesis, also discussed by Descartes, that your experiences and beliefs have been instilled in you by a "malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning" who is trying to deceive you and are all or largely false. And third, there is the standard contemporary, skeptical hypothesis which I have already mentioned, the Brain-in-the-Vat Hypothesis (BIV Hypothesis): you are a brain in a vat of nutrients being systematically deceived by clever scientists or computers by way of electrodes connected to the sensory receptors of your brain. In each of these cases, the beliefs that the skeptic intends to claim do not amount to knowledge are insensitive with respect to the skeptical hypothesis: if that skeptical hypothesis were true, you would hold all of those beliefs but they would be all or largely false.

Now consider another skeptical hypothesis, one which is not typically appealed to and which may seem quite far-fetched. On this scenario, you are a brain whose sensory receptors are being stimulated in all of the same ways as they are on the BIV Hypothesis, and thus are giving you all of the experiences and beliefs that you in fact have, only your brain is not in a vat and the receptors are not being stimulated by scientists or computers. They are not being stimulated by any intentional being. Rather, you are the only living being in the world, and the only being who has ever lived. As things unfolded in the world, it just so happened—that is, it was not preordained or planned or intended by anyone—that in one area of the vast physical world, the particles came together in just the right way so as to form a brain, your brain, and so as to impinge on your brain’s sensory receptors in such a way as to give you a large set of coherent experiences and beliefs. Let’s say that on this hypothesis this happened the day you believe you were born. Since then, it has just so happened that the particles in the area around your brain have continued to stimulate your brain in ways that have continued to produce in you all of the experiences and beliefs that you have ever had, up until and including the present time. This skeptical hypothesis does not involve any hypothesis as to why the world is this way, or what the laws of nature are, and so on. Call this the Nonintentional Hypothesis.

It is not surprising that philosophers do not appeal to skeptical hypotheses of this sort in attempting to raise the skeptical threat. Indeed, I suspect that if the Nonintentional Hypothesis were the only hypothesis that had ever been introduced—if it were what Descartes had introduced, say—there would never have been any serious philosophical concerns about skepticism, at least none that had arisen by appeal to skeptical hypothesis. The relevance of this point, of course, is that with respect to this hypothesis, Insensitivity is true: your experiences and beliefs are insensitive with respect to the skeptical hypothesis. But Independence is false. Or at least so one judges when one is the subject. I assume that my reader would, if the Nonintentional Hypothesis were specified as

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Belonging to each of these three families of skeptical hypothesis are many variants among which we might distinguish and which differ in their details.
applying to her, grant Insensitivity but reject Independence, that she would not infer, or agree, that the introduction of this hypothesis raises a serious and forceful threat to her knowledge so long as she is unable to prove (or provide good reason for believing) without appealing to, or relying on, any of her experiences or beliefs that are insensitive with respect to the hypothesis that the hypothesis is not true.\(^{24}\)

Some philosophers might protest that an appeal to the Nonintentional Hypothesis is sufficient for raising a serious threat of skepticism, and that they themselves, were they the subject, would not resist Independence with respect to it. I suspect that those who said this would say so only because they have already been accustomed to skeptical threats raised by way of other, more standard skeptical hypotheses, and that, were they not already familiar with these other threats—were they completely uninitiated—they would not grant Independence. But I will not defend this suspicion here. Nor do I need to. To make my point, we need only to consider the most austere skeptical hypothesis of all, articulated as follows: you have all of the experiences and beliefs that you in fact have, yet they are all or largely false. Your actual beliefs are insensitive to this hypothesis—call it the *Austere Hypothesis*—despite how thinly specified it is; Insensitivity is true with respect to it. But it is difficult to imagine anyone’s inferring Independence from Insensitivity when this is the hypothesis at play. It is difficult to imagine anyone’s inferring that if she is unable to prove (or provide good reason for believing) that this hypothesis is false without appealing to, or relying on, any experiences or beliefs that are insensitive with respect to it then the hypothesis would pose a significant threat to her knowledge.

Thus, I submit that Insensitivity does not have the epistemological implications we typically assume it has. The Conditional is false; Insensitivity does not entail Independence. And since Insensitivity is the basis on which the subject is supposed to infer Independence, even when the skeptical hypothesis is a standard one, for example, the BIV Hypothesis, the subject is not justified in inferring or granting Independence in standard cases either. Nor thus is he justified in accepting the skeptic’s subsequent conclusion that he does not know many of the basic things he thinks he knows.

Now, there are some natural objections to what I have said, but none is as strong as it may seem. In the remainder of the chapter, I will discuss what I take to be the four most tempting objections and explain why I do not think they are effective. Let me introduce them first.

The first is an objection to my argument against the Conditional and goes as follows: While it is true that as a matter of fact we would not infer Independence from Insensitivity

\(^{24}\) And the suggestion is false that she *could* provide the required reason for believing that the Nonintentional Hypothesis is not true simply by appealing to the fact that the Nonintentional Hypothesis is so unlikely or implausible. Her judgment that it is unlikely or implausible would involve beliefs that are insensitive with respect to the hypothesis. Or at least, it would involve beliefs her justification for which depends on beliefs that are insensitive with respect to the hypothesis. I will say more about this involvement below in my discussion of the second of the four objections.
if the skeptical hypothesis presented was either the Nonintentional or the Austere Hypothesis, the fact that we would not infer this is a fact about our psychology; it does not reflect what we should infer. Insensitivity does entail Independence, and in those non-standard cases in which we would resist Independence, we would simply be making a mistake.

The second objection grants that my argument against the Conditional succeeds but proposes that the subject has an alternate source of justification for believing Independence. It does not follow from the fact that our Conditional is false that there is not another conditional in the vicinity that is true, perhaps one with Independence as its consequent and Insensitivity as merely one conjunct of an antecedent that has multiple conjuncts. There are significant differences between the BIV Hypothesis and the Nonintentional or Austere Hypothesis, and perhaps what entails Independence is not Insensitivity alone but Insensitivity conjoined with something that obtains in the BIV case but not in the Nonintentional or Austere case.

According to the third objection, we can see that the subject’s inference to Independence is justified, even mandated, from our epistemic practices in everyday, nonskeptical situations. In everyday, nonskeptical cases in which we acknowledge the truth of Insensitivity, we subsequently infer Independence (mutatis mutandis).

Finally, the fourth objection asks why, if what I am suggesting is true, the skeptic’s line of argument strikes so many of us as correct. Why do we, as subjects, so quickly infer Independence? I will take these in order.

First Objection

According to the first objection, Insensitivity does entail Independence, and in the non-standard cases in which we would grant Insensitivity but reject Independence, we would simply be making a mistake. This objection faces two significant difficulties. First, in order for this objection to be forceful, the objector would need to provide reason for thinking that it is correct, in the face of our resistance to Independence in the nonstandard cases. Presumably, that would amount to providing justification for the idea that Insensitivity entails Independence. To be sure, I have not proven that this cannot be done, but it is important to keep in mind that this idea—our Conditional—is the very object of our inquiry. So far we have not found compelling reason to accept it, and we have found one strong reason to reject it.

What then would motivate the objector to defend the Conditional in the face of our resistance to Independence in the nonstandard cases? This question is worth thinking carefully about. Certainly the Conditional is not self-evident; or at least that is not something one could convincingly insist upon at this juncture, in light of our intuitions that Insensitivity is true but Independence false in the nonstandard cases. I suspect that the real source of this objector’s conviction that we must be mistaken in resisting Independence in these nonstandard cases stems from the fact that he has already been
impressed by skeptical arguments that appeal to standard skeptical hypotheses, such as the BIV Hypothesis. And he believes that if those arguments are correct, then so must be skeptical arguments that appeal to nonstandard hypotheses. Or he believes that the standard arguments themselves rely on the Conditional. Neither of these ways of reasoning, though, would be effective against my argument. He may not appeal to the success of standard skeptical arguments, at this point in the dialectic, if he believes that they themselves rely on the Conditional. That would be to beg the question. Indeed, he may not appeal to the success of standard skeptical arguments at all at this juncture (i.e., even if he does not assume that those arguments rely on the Conditional). Skeptical arguments that appeal to standard skeptical hypotheses themselves depend upon the subject’s having justification for believing Independence, at least in those standard cases. And whether the subject has justification for believing Independence even in those cases is the larger question of which my discussion of the nonstandard cases is in service. So far, I am claiming only that there is prima facie reason to think that such justification could not be grounded in the conditional If Insensitivity, then Independence. In order for the objector to argue effectively that, in the end, this conditional is true, his argument must not simply assume the success of skeptical arguments that appeal to standard skeptical hypotheses.

The second difficulty that this first objection faces is that, if the skeptic is forced to claim that we are making a mistake in our reaction to the Nonintentional and Austere cases, he has lost a fair amount. After all, in the war with the skeptic, raising a problem for, or a disadvantage of, or a reason to doubt an assumption in the skeptic’s line of reasoning is particularly significant. In order to take seriously the skeptic’s apparently absurd conclusion that we do not know such things as that we have hands, we must take ourselves to have extremely good reason to believe each premise on which the skeptic relies; each premise must seem nearly irresistible. If one of those premises itself, on its own, has the consequence that a strong intuition of ours is false, the skeptic’s argument will have lost a good deal of force. To make this first objection compelling, then, the objector would have to provide not only a powerful reason to believe that the Conditional is true

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25. Indeed, one popular response to skeptical arguments is to resist them by underscoring the fact that, while each of the premises that together lead to the skeptical conclusion is indeed very plausible and something we firmly believe, we are nonetheless more certain in the negation of the skeptical conclusion—we are more certain that we know we have hands, say—that we are in the truth of any of those premises, such as the premise that if I do not know that the BIV Hypothesis is false, then I do not know that I have hands. Some who offer this response proceed to jettison the particular premise about which they are the least certain (e.g., Moore 1959; for a discussion by Stroud of Moore’s particular approach, see Stroud 1984, chap. 3); others retain all of the premises but simply conclude that one of them must be false (e.g., Lycan 2001). Neither of these responses requires providing any problem for, or disadvantage of, or reason to doubt a particular one of the premises other than what that premise entails in conjunction with the other premises. The proponent of the first of the four objections we are discussing, however, would, in granting that the Conditional conflicts with our intuitions about the nonstandard skeptical hypotheses, be granting something that does provide a problem for, or at least a disadvantage of, or a reason to doubt one of the premises.
but also a very cogent explanation of our allegedly faulty intuitions about the ineffectiveness of a skeptic’s appeal to either the Nonintentional or Austere Hypothesis. This would seem a tall order given the strength of these intuitions.

Second Objection

More likely, in my view, the skeptic will grant that If Insensitivity, then Independence is false but argue that some other conditional is true, a conditional with an antecedent one conjunct of which is Insensitivity, another conjunct of which is true in the standard cases but not in the nonstandard cases. After all, there is a blatant difference between the Nonintentional and the Austere Hypotheses, on the one hand, and skeptical hypotheses such as the BIV Hypothesis, on the other. The Nonintentional Hypothesis, for instance, strikes us—in some sense that is difficult to characterize—as much more “far-fetched,” or “less plausible,” or unlikely than the BIV Hypothesis.

Perhaps then what is required for the subject to be justified in inferring Independence is not only that Insensitivity is true but that the skeptical hypothesis introduced reaches some threshold of “plausibility” or likelihood. Instead of our original inference, then, we might have the following:

_insensitivity plus not far-fetched_: This hypothesis is such that if the hypothesis were true I would hold all of the experiences and beliefs that the skeptic is challenging, yet they would be largely false, and this hypothesis is not utterly far-fetched or unlikely.

Therefore,

_independence_: In order for this hypothesis not to pose a significant threat to my knowledge of the things these beliefs are about, I must without appealing to, or relying on, any of those experiences or beliefs be able to prove, or provide good reason for believing, that the hypothesis is not true.

However, there is reason to doubt this inference as well—or, more precisely, the augmented conditional upon which the inference depends: If Insensitivity Plus Not Far-Fetched, then Independence. Consider the reasoning and beliefs involved in the subject’s determination of how far-fetched or likely a given skeptical hypothesis is, for example, the BIV Hypothesis. This reasoning would need to occur before Independence has been inferred, and it would seem to have to involve or depend upon some of the beliefs that the skeptic is ultimately challenging. Consider, for instance, one’s beliefs about what the laws of nature are. Surely the subject’s beliefs about what these laws are—-about how the world works—would play a role in his reasoning as to how likely or far-fetched a particular hypothesis is. Some laws of nature would make the Nonintentional Hypothesis more
plausible than the BIV Hypothesis. But even if the subject’s beliefs about the laws of nature are not included among the beliefs the skeptic is challenging (as they need not be on a typical BIV hypothesis), the subject’s beliefs about what the laws of nature are were formed, in the first place, on the basis of other, more basic beliefs of precisely the sort the skeptic is challenging, such as the subject’s perceptual beliefs. The same goes for other beliefs the subject might employ in judging that the BIV Hypothesis is plausible, such as beliefs about the connection between physical events in a human being’s brain and that human being’s perceptions and beliefs—or beliefs about what scientists could plausibly learn about the human brain and be able to do with it. If the skeptic intends ultimately to call into question the subject’s justification for his perceptual beliefs, then the skeptic would ultimately also be calling into question the justification the subject has for the judgment he would be making concerning how likely or far-fetched the given skeptical hypothesis is. One’s capacity for seeing a complex possibility as plausible, or not utterly unlikely or far-fetched, is the result of, depends on, an enormous set of past experiences and beliefs, beliefs whose justification in this case the skeptic would be challenging. The skeptic’s line of argument would thus ultimately undermine itself. If the skeptic’s conclusion were correct, then the subject’s inference to Independence would be based upon beliefs that do not amount to knowledge (or that the subject does not have good reason to hold).

Moreover, even if there were not this problem for the second objection, this objector would still have his work cut out for him. He would need to provide reason to believe that this augmented conditional is true. Keep in mind that so far the objector has simply proposed the augmented conditional in the face of the argument I have given against our original conditional. At present, his proposal is a bit ad hoc; it is proposed not on the basis of any reason he has given for believing that the augmented conditional is true. We would still need an explanation as to why the subject should believe that this conditional is true, as to what grounds it. That would involve, among other things, specifying to some extent at least the notion of plausibility or “far-fetchedness” that is being employed, as well as specifying the threshold that must be reached. Moreover, the second objection would require showing that the BIV Hypothesis indeed reaches this threshold. After all, there is a very significant sense in which the idea that you are a brain in a vat of nutrients connected to electrodes that are being stimulated by scientists or computers is itself far-fetched or implausible. Regardless, the biggest problem for the second objection is the first one I raised, concerning the reasoning and beliefs involved in the subject’s determination of how far-fetched or likely a given skeptical hypothesis is.

Third Objection

According to the third objection, we can see that the skeptic’s subject is justified in inferring Independence—indeed, that she must infer Independence—by looking at the epistemic role that an acknowledgment of Insensitivity (mutatis mutandis) plays in everyday,
nonskeptical cases. In some everyday cases, after all, one is ultimately justified in inferring Independence (mutatis mutandis) after one has acknowledged Insensitivity. Consider an everyday situation in which the acknowledgment of Insensitivity ultimately leads someone to accept Independence. Suppose your partner takes you to an inn. In the morning, both of you awake to what sounds like thunder and wind and rain hitting the windows and the roof. You form the belief that it is raining outside. But the curtains are drawn, and your partner asks you whether you think it's raining outside. You say that of course you do, that you know it's raining out, can't he hear it? He then realizes that you do not know something about the eccentric proprietor of the inn. Your partner proceeds to tell you that the proprietor has rigged all of the rooms with many tiny little speakers, so that every now and then, on a beautiful sunny day, he can play a trick on his guests. He sometimes makes his guests think that it is pouring rain outside, so that they are delighted and relieved when they walk downstairs to see that it is really a beautiful sunny day after all. Having heard this, you realize that your belief that it is raining outside is insensitive with respect to the possibility or hypothesis that the proprietor is playing this trick on you right now and that really it is a sunny day: on that hypothesis, you believe that it is raining but that belief is false. You conclude that you do not know that it is raining, and you conclude this because you have inferred Independence: that in order for the hypothesis in question not to pose a significant threat to your knowledge that it is raining out, you would need to be able to prove (or provide good reason for believing) that the hypothesis in question is not true, and that you would need to do so without appealing to, or relying on, any experiences or beliefs that are insensitive with respect to that hypothesis. But without further evidence, that is not something you are able to do.

A skeptic's appeal to such everyday cases in order to support the subject's inference to Independence, however, would not succeed. Before explaining why, let me make explicit that this appeal is intended in defense of our original conditional (i.e., the Conditional—if Insensitivity, then Independence), and not merely the augmented conditional. Showing that the augmented conditional is true would not help the skeptic, because of the problem I raised in my discussion of the second objection. If the skeptic's conclusion were correct, then the subject's inference to Independence would be based upon beliefs that do not amount to knowledge (or that the subject does not have good reason to hold).

Consider, then, the dialectical juncture at which we currently are with the proponent of the original conditional. I began by raising a problem for the original conditional: in nonstandard cases we would grant Insensitivity but reject Independence. One who defends the original conditional in the face of this objection would have to claim that our intuitions in those cases are simply mistaken. In order to do so effectively, the objector would need to provide strong reason to believe that the original conditional is true. But

\[\text{\textsuperscript{26}}\text{. Hereafter, I will omit the "mutatis mutandis" when discussing everyday cases.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{27}}\text{. I say "merely," because the original conditional entails the augmented conditional.}\]
what reason could that be? The mere idea that the original conditional is *self-evident*, or analytically or conceptually true, is unpersuasive in light of the fact that in the nonstandard skeptical cases we grant Insensitivity but reject Independence. Nor could an adequate reason be that one has already been impressed by standard skeptical arguments; as I explained, that would be to beg the question. It is at this point, I am imagining, that the proponent of the original conditional appeals to everyday cases. He must claim that everyday cases provide such strong support for the original conditional that we are justified in concluding—perhaps even *must* conclude—that our intuitions about the nonstandard hypotheses are false.

One issue we must consider, however, is precisely what it is in everyday cases that justifies the subject in inferring Independence. Our objector proposes that it is the truth of Insensitivity. The proponent of merely the augmented conditional proposes that it is the truth of Insensitivity in conjunction with the given hypothesis’s reaching some threshold of plausibility. A third possibility which we must take seriously is that it is one or both of these *in conjunction with* the fulfillment of at least one other condition that is fulfilled in everyday cases but not in skeptical cases. In order for the objection at hand to succeed, we must have compelling reason to rule out both the second and third possibilities.

Now, I suspect that the proponent of the original conditional does not have sufficient reason to rule out even the third possibility; however, I will not pursue that suspicion here.\(^{28}\) Even if he did have strong reason to rule out the third possibility, it seems he certainly does not have justification for ruling out the second possibility, that is, the possibility that what justifies the subject’s inference of Independence in everyday cases is the

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\(^{28}\) The differences between skeptical cases and everyday cases are significant enough that the skeptic would have difficulty arguing, in as compelling a way as he must, that none of those differences could matter to the justification of the inference. One salient difference, of course, is the extent of, or size of the portion of, the beliefs in question (out of all of the beliefs the subject holds). In the everyday case, the beliefs whose epistemic status is challenged—the beliefs that are insensitive with respect to the given hypothesis—are quite limited. They include, for instance, your belief that it is raining, your belief that the sounds you are hearing are being caused by the rain, and so on. In the skeptical case, the beliefs whose epistemic status is challenged include nearly all of the subject’s empirical beliefs, as well as all beliefs whose justification depends on those empirical beliefs. Why would the extent of, or the size of the portion of, the beliefs in question matter to whether one is justified in inferring Independence? Perhaps it would not matter, but not having a clear reason for believing that it would matter is unlikely to be sufficient for possessing the kind of irresistible support the skeptic needs for the original conditional.

Consider a second possible difference between everyday cases and the skeptical case. In the skeptical case, the subject’s inference that he does not know what he thought he knew (or that there is a serious threat to his knowledge) does not involve his learning a new fact; whereas in the everyday case, the person’s inference often, perhaps always, does. That is, while I’ve given only one example I think further inquiry might corroborate that in everyday contexts one thing that typically plays a major role in a person’s changing her mind about her knowledge is the person’s learning a new fact (or remembering one she hadn’t thought about when she concluded that she knew what she thought she knew). In the case of the inn, you learn a fact about the proprietor. But in the skeptical case, this element is not present. The subject does not (or at least, need not) learn a new fact (or remember a fact).
truth of Insensitivity in conjunction with the given hypothesis’s reaching some required threshold of plausibility. That is because in everyday cases in which a subject infers Independence at least in part on the basis of Insensitivity, the hypothesis in question always does reach a significant threshold of plausibility. Given what your partner has just told you at the inn, the possibility that the proprietor is playing a trick on you and that it is not raining is not implausible or far-fetched. Everyday cases themselves thus provide no reason to prefer the original conditional to the augmented one.

Moreover, given that our intuitions in the nonstandard cases run afoul of the original conditional but not the augmented conditional, not only do everyday cases provide no reason to prefer the original to the augmented conditional, but the rest of the evidence—the evidence from the skeptical cases—would seem to provide reason to prefer the augmented conditional to the original conditional. But as we have seen, the skeptic could not successfully employ the augmented conditional, because of the problem concerning the source of the subject’s justification for his judgment that the given skeptical hypothesis is plausible.

One might think that the objector could in fact appeal here to that very problem, in order to argue that there is reason to prefer the original conditional to merely the augmented conditional. The objector might argue that what the everyday cases support is the idea that either the original conditional is true, or (merely) the augmented conditional is true, and then subsequently infer that the original conditional is correct because of the problem I have raised for the skeptical proponent of merely the augmented conditional. But this would not be feasible. For the objector would then be resting his argument for the original conditional upon the claim that the skeptic’s reasoning in the standard cases is not problematic. He would be supporting a crucial premise in his argument by assuming that his argument ultimately succeeds.\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Fourth Objection}

If what I am suggesting is true, why has the skeptic’s line of argument struck so many of us as correct? Why do we so quickly infer Independence in the standard cases? Doesn’t my argument run afoul of our strong intuitions in the standard cases that the subject is justified in accepting, even forced to grant, Independence?

Notice first that this fourth objection is especially weak when proposed in defense of the original conditional (as opposed to merely the augmented conditional). Maintaining the original conditional would mean running afoul of our intuitions in the nonstandard cases.
cases. The fact that my argument falsifies our intuitions about standard skeptical cases is not adequate reason to reject my argument in favor of the original conditional if the latter conditional falsifies our intuitions about nonstandard skeptical cases.

Regardless, the reason we typically go along with the skeptic’s inference of Independence in the standard cases is not difficult to find. I listed earlier three possibilities as to what justifies a subject in everyday cases in inferring Independence: (1) the truth of Insensitivity; (2) the truth of Insensitivity in conjunction with the hypothesis’s reaching some threshold of plausibility; (3) the first or second possibility in conjunction with the fulfillment of at least one condition that is fulfilled in everyday cases but not in skeptical cases. My argument is compatible with both the second and third possibilities. If the second possibility is actual, then the reason we go along with the skeptic’s inference of Independence in standard cases is that such an inference is in fact valid. In that case, however, the skeptic’s reasoning ultimately undermines itself. If the third possibility is actual, then the reason we typically go along with the skeptic’s inference of Independence in standard cases is presumably that Independence is true in every other case in which (2) obtains with which we are familiar, that is, all everyday cases in which (2) obtains.

Allow me, then, to summarize the argument of section 4. In order for the skeptic’s argument to succeed, the skeptic’s subject must have justification for inferring Independence. What justifies the subject in inferring Independence? The natural answer is that it is the subject’s belief in Insensitivity. However, consideration of some nonstandard skeptical hypotheses suggests that Insensitivity does not in fact entail Independence; when either of these nonstandard hypotheses is in question, we would grant Insensitivity but reject Independence. And the skeptic does not have the resources to argue adequately that our judgments about these hypotheses are false. The skeptic might propose that perhaps what justifies the subject’s inferring Independence is not merely the subject’s belief in Insensitivity but rather her belief in Insensitivity plus her belief that the hypothesis in question is not utterly far-fetched or implausible. But this proposal would not help the skeptic, since a subject’s judgment that a particular hypothesis is not utterly far-fetched or implausible would ultimately rely on some of the very beliefs the skeptic is challenging. The skeptic’s would-be conclusion would render the subject without justification for accepting Independence in the first place. In the end, we are left wondering whether it is really so patent, as it is typically taken to be, that the skeptic’s subject is justified in accepting—let alone must accept—Independence.

As on Stroud’s strategy though, nothing in what I am proposing—that the subject is unjustified in inferring Independence, no matter what the skeptical hypothesis is—entails that our beliefs do amount to knowledge after all, or that skepticism is false. It does not entail even that Independence is false with respect to the skeptic’s subject. Independence

30. In fact, my argument is compatible with the first possibility as well. It depends only on the subject’s not having adequate justification for believing in the first possibility.
could be true and still the subject not, from his epistemic position, have justification for inferring it. On this approach, the skeptical challenge is not to be answered but only to be blocked from arising in the first place. And it is to be blocked by focusing on an early step in the skeptic’s line of thinking, one that often goes unscrutinized. As on Stroud’s strategy as well, that step is to be blocked by considering the relation between the epistemic position of the uninitiated subject and the requirement of a kind of disengagement—in particular, the second kind of disengagement I discussed in section 3. On that second sense of disengagement, for one to be disengaged from a set of beliefs when undertaking a particular activity is for one to undertake that activity without ever appealing to any of the beliefs in that set. The central idea I have offered in section 4 is that the subject does not have justification for concluding that in order for him not to face a threat of skepticism he must, from such a disengaged position, prove or provide good reason for thinking that the skeptical hypothesis is false. And, seen from one perspective, the reason he does not have such justification stems from the fact that when he first encounters the skeptic, he is not disengaged in this way. The subject is not sufficiently disengaged to conclude that he must get disengaged lest he face a significant threat to his knowledge. 31

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Stroud’s Proposal for Removing the Threat of Skepticism


