**Why Skepticism Fails**

In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume defends the position that today we would call global skepticism, according to which reason is incompetent to reach any substantive conclusions about the nature of reality. Toward the end of his discussion of this topic, Hume considers an objection to global skepticism, given on behalf of those dogmatists who dismiss the skeptic without a hearing, whose practice, he says, he cannot approve:

If the skeptical reasonings be strong, say they, ‘tis a proof that reason may have

some force and authority: if weak, they can never be sufficient to invalidate the

conclusions of our understanding.[[1]](#footnote-1)

He then immediately continues:

The argument is not just…Reason first appears to be in possession of the throne,

prescribing laws and imposing maxims, with an absolute sway and authority. Her enemy,

therefore, is obliged to take shelter under her protection, and by making use of rational

arguments to prove the fallaciousness and imbecility of reason, produces, in a manner, a

patent under her own hand and seal. This patent has at first an authority, proportioned to

the present and immediate authority of reason, from which it is derived. But as it is

supposed to be contradictory to reason, it gradually diminishes the force of that

governing power, and its own at the same time, till at last they both vanish away into

nothing, by a regular and just diminution.[[2]](#footnote-2)

According to Hume, then, skeptical arguments, being rational arguments, undermine reason and thereby themselves as well, leaving reason utterly discredited and destroyed. Fortunately, he says, nature has not left us dependent on reason as the sole or even the main source of our judgments. Instead, instinct, habit, and custom necessitate that we will judge in certain ways without the help of reason. At the same time, our natural sociability and the demands of common life will not permit us to reside in our skeptical qualms which, however compelling they may seem to be from the rational point of view, altogether lose their power over us outside of the philosopher’s closet.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In responding to the antiskeptical argument adumbrated above, Hume does not claim that said argument is either invalid or unsound: instead, he calls it “not just.” His reason for rejecting it lies not in any apparent logical defect, but instead in his own “New Science of Man.” In accordance with the principles of his peculiar associationist psychology, Hume presents a naturalistic account of the corrosive effects of skeptical argument on reason’s authority that explains how it is that skeptical arguments can succeed in undermining reason even though they undermine themselves at the same time. Lying back of this is Hume’s account of the nature of probability.

According to Hume probability, whether it be probability of chances or effects in relation to their causes, is always merely the measure of the degree of anticipation that we assign to a future event given its antecedents. It is merely a measure of our expectation of a certain outcome given certain antecedents, one that we naturally project onto the events themselves as an objective property or relation between antecedents and consequents. The certainty that we attach to the relation cause and effect and project onto observed regularities as a necessary connexion between events is simply a consequence of the fact that, having observed this regularity many times and never having seen it fail, we strongly anticipate the effect upon observing the cause, being in the grips of an expectation that amounts to certainty. On other occasions, however, we observe antecedents that, though *often* associated with certain consequents, have not been experienced to be uniformly so. In that case, our anticipation of and subsequent expectation that we will observe that consequent falls below the level of certainty and knowledge and becomes mere belief. Unlike knowledge, which we apprehend with certainty, belief comes in degrees that correspond to our felt level of confidence in that outcome. The more that our anticipation and subsequent expectation of that outcome diminishes, the less we believe that it will actually occur. When we reach the point at which we anticipate the non-occurrence of that consequent or outcome to a higher degree than its occurrence, we cease to believe altogether and instead begin to positively disbelieve that it will occur. For Hume, there are no probabilities for consequences or outcomes below .5, despite the fact that the mathematical calculus of probability can assign numerical probabilities to those outcomes, simply because no positive belief can be assigned to them on the part of anyone who believes them less likely than not to occur.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Hume uses something like the same account in describing how it is that skeptical arguments can undermine reason. Reason, he tells us, originally claims absolute authority to discern what is true and false about the nature of things and to establish our knowledge claims with absolute certainty. As such, the skeptic (like Philo in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*) pretends to be in league with his dogmatic opponent (Demea), only to turn on him in the end and attempt to use reason itself to undermine reason’s claims to authority and truth. This it does by using rational arguments which have the psychological effect of undermining the confidence and thus the certainty we place in reason:

The skeptical and the dogmatic reasons are of the same kind, tho’ contrary in

their tendency; so that where the latter is strong, it has an enemy of equal force in

the former to encounter; and as their force were at first equal, they still

continue so, as long as either of them subsists; nor does one of them lose

any force in the contest, without taking as much from its antagonist.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Skeptical arguments undermine our confidence in reason and shatter our certainty concerning its employment. Attempts by dogmatic philosophers to rescue reason from these arguments, or to mitigate the claims of reason to accommodate the skeptical arguments, evoke further skeptical critiques couched within the terms of and appropriate to meet the claims of the defenders, thus further eroding our confidence in reason’s ability to justify our beliefs about reality. Having fought reason to the last ditch and demanded unconditional surrender, skepticism turns reason against skepticism itself. At this point, reason is completely discredited as a source of substantive truth and has no legitimate employment for us beyond its role in problem-solving, where it is, as it always ought to be, the slave of our desires, passions, and the ends set for us by nature.

I contend that Hume has failed to understand the argument that he here rejects in so cavalier a fashion; he has not thought deeply enough about the issues here. Further, his attempt to give a naturalistic account of the “gradual diminution” in our confidence in reason is fatally ambiguous in a way that reveals it to rest on a fallacy of special pleading. I shall first reconstruct the argument and show that it justifies the dogmatist in dismissing global skepticism without a hearing on the grounds that skeptical arguments cannot demonstrate this conclusion *in principle*. I shall then challenge Hume’s claim that skeptical arguments can *legitimately* undermine our confidence in reason and can do so, in the way that Hume describes, only on the basis of a confusion that once revealed robs skeptical arguments of their power to persuade us, regardless of their basis or their content. Skepticism thus fails and leaves our confidence in reason intact. At the same time, I will argue that the failure of skepticism only establishes that we could never have a good reason for supposing that dogmatism is false and that this falls short of establishing that the claims of dogmatism are true.

I

I interpret Hume (*qua* Global Skeptic) as being committed to two theses. First, he claims that reason cannot lead us to any *substantive* knowledge, i.e. knowledge about the nature of things as they exist in themselves. Second, Hume maintains that *reason itself* can be used to establish this conclusion, on the basis of arguments that reason itself devises and that pass muster before its own eyes, so that, in his words (quoted above) the skeptic “produces, in a manner, a patent under its own hand and seal.” This suggests two preliminary comments.

First, it is to be noted that the question as to whether or not we possess knowledge is itself a substantive matter of fact. Hume does not attempt to show that there is no substantive human knowledge on purely *a priori* grounds. He does not claim, for example, that the notion of knowledge is incoherent, or self-contradictory, or that it is logically impossible, on purely conceptual grounds, for there to be such a thing as knowledge. Indeed, Hume himself would have strong reasons for resisting any such “short way” with the possibility of knowledge: more than anyone else, Hume insists that no argument based on merely conceptual claims (“relations among ideas”) can entail anything about substantive matters of fact. Hume therefore tacitly concedes that it is *possible* (in some relevant sense) that we possess knowledge of matters of fact, i.e. that we *could have* possessed such knowledge even if, as it turns out, we do not so that it is merely a contingent fact that we are incapable of knowledge. In that case, his arguments can only be supposed to show that we do not *in fact* possess any such knowledge. In turn, this means that the skeptic’s claim about human knowledge is intended to be a *substantive* claim about human knowledge to which rational argument ineluctably leads us. In this way, the skeptic hopes to undermine the authority of reason altogether.

Second, by “reason” here I am supposing that Hume is referring to *discursive* reason, the operation of the faculty of *inference*, by means of which we arrive at substantive factual beliefs about things on the basis of other beliefs we already have or on the basis of non-propositional evidence, whether directly (as in sense-perception) or indirectly (on the basis of, e.g., authority or testimony.) In Hume’s historical context (what we now call the Early Modern Period in philosophy) exaggerated claims were typically made on behalf this faculty. The possibility of knowledge, for example, was taken to depend on whether or not we could find some indubitable foundation for knowledge, such as a set of self-evident truths from which substantive claims could be derived using equally self-evident rules of inference, or the immediate, incorrigible contents of consciousness considered as such. Hume’s arguments, of course, were instrumental in decentering this tradition in epistemology. In this context, however, Hume is working within that tradition in the hopes of the bringing it down by showing that the very tools of inference and argument it relies on can be used to undermine those claims. Because Hume is not altogether wrong about this – some of the claims made by early modern Rationalists were, after all, excessive and exaggerated – it is easy to suppose that his strategy is more successful than it is. If Hume simply restricted his skeptical critique to the claim that the faculty of discursive reason cannot establish its exaggerated claims to authority and centrality, this would not by itself entail his global skepticism about knowledge generally. At most, it would require that we reconceive the role and authority of discursive reason in theoretical inquiry, something that it might be a good thing to do anyway, and for which Hume would justly deserve our thanks. However, if Hume wants to do more than this he also needs to do more than this, and argue that reason *refutes itself* by generating skeptical arguments that pass muster in its own eyes and at the same time entail that inference and argument, the very tools on which it relies, cannot attain to any substantive knowledge of what he calls “matters of fact.” Once this is pointed out, one can be forgiven for suspecting that accomplishing this is much more difficult and problematic than Hume and his followers have supposed.

How hard is it? Consider the following. Suppose that there is a successful argument for skepticism, the thesis that we can know nothing substantive. Call this argument S. (For our purposes here, it does not matter what this argument is or what specific claims it contains.) The conclusion of this argument will either be, or entail, that we can know nothing substantive about matters of fact. However, this conclusion, as we have seen, is a substantive claim on Hume’s own view, one that need not have been true, and thus about a matter of fact, i.e. whether or not human beings *in fact* possess knowledge. In that case, if the conclusion is true, then we cannot know that it is, even if it is. After all, the conclusion of S either is, or entails, the central claim of global skepticism, i.e. that human beings have no substantive knowledge about any matters of fact. However, since that claim is itself a substantive knowledge claim about a matter of fact, it is one of the items concerning which we are debarred from having knowledge if that claim is true. This, of course, results in the following nasty dilemma. On the one hand, if S is a successful argument for global skepticism, and we are in a position to judge that this is the case, then we are in a position to affirm the truth of that conclusion on the basis of S and thus to know that global skepticism is true. However, simply because the truth of S’s conclusion rules out my having any knowledge of any matter of fact on any basis, including rational arguments, the truth of global skepticism is incompatible with my being able to know that global skepticism is true on the basis of S or any other argument. Thus, if I know anything at all on the basis of any argument, even the truth of global skepticism itself, then I possess substantive knowledge concerning a matter of fact, something that is ruled out by the truth of global skepticism and thus incompatible with that doctrine. Thus, my knowing that global skepticism is true, on the basis of argument S or any other epistemic basis, entails that global skepticism is false by that very fact.

On the other hand, suppose that thesis of global skepticism is true. In that case, it is not possible for me to know any substantive knowledge claim about any matter of fact. In particular, as we have just seen, since the thesis of global skepticism is itself a substantive knowledge claim about a matter of fact, I cannot know that it is true, even if it is. For exactly the same reason, however, neither can I know that the thesis of global skepticism is true on the basis of S, of any other argument, or on the basis of any evidence whatsoever. Therefore, even on the supposition S is, in fact, a sound argument for global skepticism if the conclusion of that argument is true I cannot be in any position to judge that this is the case. If I were in a position to properly or successfully judge that S is a good argument for global skepticism, then I would at the same time be in an equally good position to judge that global skepticism was true on the basis of S, in which case I would, once again, be in a position to know that global skepticism is true. As such, I would once again be in possession of substantive knowledge of a matter of fact, something that cannot be the case if global skepticism is true. Such an argument either leads to a true conclusion, in which case I am disbarred from knowing that this conclusion is true, or I am capable on the basis of that argument of knowing that global skepticism is true, which in turn entails that global skepticism is false. As such, there can be no successful argument that we can know nothing substantive about any matter of fact, and thus no successful argument for global skepticism based on the contention that reason somehow refutes or undermines itself.

It is easy to dismiss this kind of argument as sophistical or merely an exercise in “word magic.” It is neither, but perhaps its cogency can only be appreciated only after sustained reflection, which the reader must accomplish on his or her own in order to be persuaded of its soundness. What the proponent of the argument can do, however, is facilitate this process by presenting the argument in different ways or, what comes to the same thing, by suggesting some further implications of this line of reasoning. I shall now attempt to do this, and thus wear down the reader’s resistance to the central insight of the argument I have presented. These can be considered to be “additional considerations” on behalf of the argument, not unlike those appended to Hume’s a priori argument against miracles in his famous essay on that topic.

II

Hume proposes to show that reason refutes itself through showing that the “fallaciousness and imbecility” of reason can be shown using rational arguments, such as those that leap from practically every page of part I on the *Treatise*. Now, a rational argument has two purposes: first, to justify its conclusion by means of its premises, and second, to rationally convince and persuade the person to whom the argument is addressed that the conclusion is in fact justified by those premises. The person who devises and promotes the argument, if honest, believes it to be and presents it as a sound argument for its conclusion. The person to whom the argument is addressed is asked to believe that conclusion on the basis of that argument. This latter, however, requires the exercise of *judgment* on the part of the person to whom the argument is addressed and there is no antecedent reason to suppose that one’s judgment concerning the soundness of an argument will always correspond to the actual logical properties of the argument itself. The same, of course, will also hold in the case of the person who devises and presents the argument to begin with. It is as least possible that his or her honest belief that the argument is sound is, in fact, based on a mistaken judgment about its actual logical properties.

Indeed, to judge by appearances people in general and even trained philosophers are frequently mistaken about matters of fact concerning the soundness and even the validity of some arguments. Many other arguments remain controversial, with some philosophers endorsing and defending while others reject and criticize those arguments. Further, it appears to be a well-confirmed empirical fact that human beings are particularly prone to errors in reasoning and judgment, in particular the common and persistent errors that philosophers call *fallacies*. Logicians have even collected and named a large number of these oft-repeated and hard to resist errors both in reasoning and the evaluation of reasoning. Centuries of instruction have done little to correct these natural tendencies to error. Many people who ought to know better and do nevertheless constantly fall into these errors.

Rational persuasion, then, is never simply a matter of simply responding in some automatic, causally determined way to the logical properties of any argument considered *as such*. Being rationally persuaded always involves an individual act of judgment on the part of each person who considers it concerning the soundness of the reasoning embodied in the argument in question. Whether or not an argument really establishes its conclusion is a matter of fact that we can determine only through rational examination and the rational judgment that this examination supports. As such, we have no direct, unmediated access to arguments or their desiderative properties of a sort that is denied to, say, an empirical scientist investigating nature. If we assert that a certain argument is sound, and we are challenged on this point (e.g. someone asks us “Are you sure?”) , it is our judgment concerning a matter of fact that is being called into question and it is this challenge that needs somehow to be met.

Suppose that I have initially judged (with full conviction and without doubt) that some particular argument is sound and that someone has challenged me on this point as, in principle, could happen whenever I make a judgment about the soundness of any particular argument. How should I proceed? Simply to respond, “Yes I am sure!” will not do; this is simply to reiterate one’s previous claim and expresses no more than the subjective conviction produced by one’s previous judgment, a conviction that will be no more justified than that judgment itself. A more likely response to this challenge will be to say something like, “Well, what’s wrong with the argument?” Suppose the challenger responds that he or she just doesn’t find the argument persuasive, though off the top of his or her head he or she may not be able to say why and will have to think further about it. I, of course, find the argument persuasive; however, unless I am prepared to assert my own infallibility, the honest perplexity of someone else, especially someone I respect or at least do not deem incompetent, ought to give me pause. Do I really know that I am right to judge the argument sound and that he or she is wrong to withhold judgment concerning it? Although my subjective conviction remains, at this point only entrenched dogmatism can equate that conviction with objective certainty.

The next step, then, is to re-examine the argument in order to confirm or refute one’s initial judgment, perhaps by taking a closer look at the argument and checking for various sorts of logical and factual errors that one may suspect to be lurking there. As a consequence, one will either reaffirm one’s original judgment or switch sides by adopting the contrary judgment in preference to the original one. However, we have every reason to suppose that our subsequent judgment is just as fallible as our initial judgment, no matter how it comes out. We have all experienced cases where our initial judgment, even a “gut reaction,” turns out to have been (at least apparently) correct while our more careful, critical judgment to the contrary turns out to be false. We often “see ghosts” when re-examining arguments we have considered previously, confusing ourselves by the consideration of useless complications and extraneous considerations that appear to us to be more significant that they are. On the other hand, if I reaffirm my original judgment, I may simply be making the same error the second time that I did the first, one that for idiosyncratic, historical, or cultural reasons I may be blind to, though others may apprehend it well enough. If that is so, then “checking” in this case considered in itself adds little to our confidence in the truth of our judgments about the soundness of reasoning as expressed in arguments. So my judgments in this area, no matter how careful, can never be extrinsically certain for me. Indeed, just because judgments of this sort concern substantive matters of fact, their truth is also a contingent matter of fact and thus all such judgments are possibly false even when they are in fact true. As such, they can never be extrinsically certain for us, with the result that our subjective certainty will always outrun the evidence we can produce for our judgment. While we may have no doubt, there will still be room for doubt from the objective point of view.

However, a more serious problem is this. Even for me to suppose that “checking” will do any good in this situation already presupposes that my faculty of judgment in this area is generally reliable even if fallible. Otherwise, I would have no more reason to regard my later, more “careful” judgments to be any more likely to be true than the initial, spontaneous judgment representing my “gut reaction.” This conviction that my faculty of judgment is reliable is, of course, a substantive empirical claim, one that is contingent and at best knowable *a posteriori*. Moreover, if the conclusion of the argument for global skepticism is true, it is one concerning which I cannot possibly have any knowledge, being exactly the sort of claim that this argument, if successful, excludes as a possible object of knowledge. In that case, however, I once again face a dilemma. On the one hand, I can judge that the argument for global skepticism is sound, and thus that the conclusion of the argument is true, only on the assumption that my faculty of judgment in such matters is reliable. On the other hand, if the conclusion of the argument for global skepticism is true, that assumption is gratuitous for me since it concerns a matter of fact, i.e. a contingent, substantive empirical claim, precisely the sort of thing that according to that very conclusion lies beyond my power to know or even to justifiably believe. In that case, however, I have no reason to trust my faculty of judgment in these matters, and so no reason to suppose that I am in any position to evaluate that reasoning and thus either confirm or reject that conclusion. In that case, it is quite useless for me even to bother examining argument S, since given the truth of its conclusion I am in no position to judge that this is the case, even if it is. The conclusion either is true, in which case I am not capable of making this judgment, or I am in a position to make this judgment, in which case that conclusion has to be false. Since in either case I can reach no other conclusion except that the conclusion is false, there is no need for me to consider argument S any further. Indeed, even if I wanted to, there would be no way for me to do so successfully unless that conclusion of that argument is false. So argument S can never provide me with a good reason for supposing that its conclusion is true, even if it is a sound argument and its conclusion is in fact true. Once again, we find that argument S, the argument for global skepticism, fails to undermine reason through the use of its own methods.

III

As we have seen, our irrefragable assumption that we can successfully make judgments about matters of fact, and correct our erroneous ones as well by reexamining them, presupposes that we possess reliable cognitive faculties of a sort consistent with the apparent fallibility of such judgments. This, in turn, will be true (and indeed possible) only if we in fact possess reliable cognitive faculties, i.e. truth-directed faculties that, when properly used, standardly produce truth-tracking spontaneous judgments *and* which are self-correcting, such that those faculties can be used to check themselves, detect, and eliminate both culpable and non-culpable errors resulting from their functioning under normal conditions. This, as it turns out, is a presupposition for the possibility of making any credible judgments at all. It cannot, therefore, be justified by appeal to those faculties without circularity. It is therefore a matter of faith, and one that is ineluctable for us if we are to make any judgments, and thus think coherently, at all. At the same time, as I shall now go on to argue, this presupposition is not open to skeptical critique, even in principle.

Let us consider argument S again. The conclusion of the argument asserts that we have no substantive knowledge about any matter of fact. This appears to entail, as a mere matter of logic (“relations of ideas”) that we altogether lack reliable cognitive faculties.[[6]](#footnote-6) If we had such faculties, faculties capable both of tracking truth and such as to be self-correcting, then we would be capable of arriving at substantive truths about matters of fact if we only used those faculties correctly, something clearly incompatible with the truth of S’s conclusion. Thus, to affirm that the conclusion of S is true and that we have the reliable cognitive faculties necessary in order to do this would involve a logical contradiction. As such, the truth of the conclusion of argument S would exclude the possibility that anyone, even the skeptic, possesses reliable cognitive faculties. The obvious difficulty for the skeptic, and for argument S, is that unless we possess reliable cognitive faculties none of us, not even the skeptic, will be in a position to affirm that conclusion on the basis of that argument, simply because to do so requires that we possess reliable cognitive faculties and this is precisely what the conclusion of that argument rules out. As such, I can never be rationally justified in accepting the conclusion of S on the basis of that argument, even if S is in fact a sound argument. It is worth considering this point at length.

In order to arrive at the judgment that S is sound, I have to judge that S is both valid and has all true premises. Beginning with the first of these, in order for me to judge that S is valid, I must be able to apprehend this fact about S. While validity may be a logical property of arguments, and thus a matter of “relations between ideas,” my apprehension of that fact about any particular argument is not. I can mistakenly judge a valid argument to be invalid, or suppose that an invalid argument passes muster in this respect. In order for me to apprehend the fact of the matter and thus to successfully arrive at a correct judgment concerning the validity of any argument, I require a reliable cognitive faculty – let’s call it the faculty of *rational intuition* just to give it a name – that allows me to apprehend the logical properties of actual arguments, such as argument S. This faculty, with which we generally credit ourselves, is certainly fallible; as I have just mentioned, we can sometimes be mistaken or misled about the logical properties of a particular argument, or even unable to decide whether a it is valid or not. However, this is consistent with the reliability of such a faculty just so long as it is self-correcting and thus any errors we do make are in principle eliminable through repeated uses of that faculty.

Now either I possess such a faculty or I do not. If I do possess such a faculty, then I will be in a position to judge whether or not argument S is valid. Suppose I do judge this to be the case; then the conclusion of S will follow if the premises of S are true. However, if the conclusion of S is true, then it follows that I do not have reliable cognitive faculties, i.e. faculties capable of arriving at the truth about substantive matters of fact, such as whether or not S is valid. In that case, I will not be in a position to successfully judge the validity of S to begin with. Once again, I am driven to the conclusion that S is not a successful argument for skepticism. Either I am in a position to judge that S is valid, in which case the conclusion of that argument must be false, or its conclusion is true, in which case I am in no position to affirm this either way. In either case, it is useless for me to even consider the question of the validity of S, since even if S is valid, I can know this only if S is unsound. Thus, if I can know anything at all, one thing that I can and do know is that S can thus never give me a good reason for embracing skepticism.

Let us move on. In order for me to judge that S is sound, I need to know more than simply that S is valid. I also have to know that S’s premises are true as well. These premises are presumably going to be substantive, contingent, empirical claims concerning what Hume calls “matters of fact,” since otherwise they will hardly be relevant to establishing the substantive, contingent, empirical claim that reason is incapable of leading us to the truth about matters of fact. Such claims will things like, “There are perceptual errors,” “Our cognitive faculties are fallible,” “Sometimes we dream,” “There are hallucinations,” and so on, intended to describe the human epistemic condition. Indeed, it is to be noted that the conclusion of S is a categorical, and not merely hypothetical, proposition about a matter of fact hence one that can only be received as such on the basis of non-propositional empirical evidence. However, if the conclusion of S is true, then once again I do not possess reliable cognitive faculties capable of leading me to knowledge of such matters, which of course includes such things as whether or not the premises of S are true. In that case, I am in no position to rationally affirm that the conclusion of S is true on the basis of those premises, even if they are true. Reflection on my true epistemic situation within the skeptical context reveals to me the futility of the skeptic’s project and so absolves me from any further interest in or concern about it. I am once again persuaded that if I know anything at all then one of the things that I know is that there can be no successful argument for global skepticism, even if it is true. That, in turn, is because if global skepticism is true then I can know nothing at all on the basis of any kind of argument or evidence whatsoever. Global skepticism, then, can never be so much as rationally justified for me, *even in principle*, let alone something that reason itself compels me to accept to its cost. Given my actual epistemic condition, skepticism is not and cannot be a live option for me. In that case, arguments on its behalf must be fallacious and our examination of them directed only to the detection of those fallacies.

IV

As my previous sentence indicates, the examination of skepticism need not be entirely negative. Using skepticism as our touchstone, I believe that we can identify the reliable cognitive faculties necessary for us to reach any rational conclusion based on inference as expressed in argument and thus presupposed by all reasoning, including skeptical reasoning. By showing that inference and argument require, as a transcendentally necessary condition for their very possibility, that we possess specific reliable cognitive faculties capable of providing us (in contradiction to the conclusion of argument S) with substantively true knowledge of contingent, substantive states of affairs, this in turn will drive the final nails into the coffin of skepticism, from which we may hope that it will never arise.

Among the reliable cognitive faculties necessary for discursive reasoning, and thus for us to be able to evaluate argument S is the faculty traditionally known as *introspection* and the aforementioned faculty of *rational intuition*. Without the former, I cannot even apprehend the argument as the content of a mental act of reflection in order to judge its soundness. Without the latter, I cannot judge, on the basis of that content, the logical validity of the argument. Introspection is simply a consequence of my direct and immediate awareness of my own mental states and their contents, something without which it would be impossible even for me to what I am currently thinking and thus even to think at all. My occurrent knowledge of what I am immediately aware is the result of my concentrating my attention on my current mental states and their contents, which results in spontaneous judgments about those contents and their features. Introspection is fallible insofar as either our ability to attend to our current mental states or features of those states themselves (due to vagueness, lack of detail, etc.) may prevent our being able to judge in any useful way our current mental state or its contents. Nevertheless, in cases where we clearly and distinctly apprehend those contents *as such*, the lack of any useful distinction between appearance and reality in this context allows us to grasp these contents and their features with extrinsic certainty due to their incorrigibility for us. Indeed, introspection even allows us to grasp certain substantive, contingent facts about the world, such as that I exist and that I am a self-conscious rational subject, with extrinsic certainty. For this reason, we do not ordinarily talk in this context of having beliefs about the states or contents of our own minds, but simply of either knowing or not knowing these states and their contents.

Rational intuition presupposes introspection and involves an application of it. However, unlike ordinary introspection, the mental contents involved have special features that allow us to directly apprehend certain truths about what Hume called “relations of ideas.” In this case, the truth is grasped as immanent in that content itself and thus not simply about that particular content, but instead as a general truth about abstract entities and knowable in principle with intrinsic certainty on the basis of a single presentation. Such truths constitute what is traditionally known as *a priori* knowledge. Although Hume insisted that knowledge of “relations between ideas” can never entail anything substantive about matters of fact, as I have argued elsewhere this is simply false: there are no square circles, and we know this without the need for any empirical justification simply because we know that square circles are impossible. The in principle possibility of *a priori* synthetic knowledge cannot be merely dismissed or discounted.

All of the judgments produced by discursive reasoning of any kind involve, and thus rely on, memory. All inferences occur in time, and require a transition in thought from one temporally prior set of grounds or beliefs to some further belief that we subsequently acquire. The self-conscious rational subject that makes the inference must therefore be capable of retaining in his or her present thought the temporally preceding grounds or premises of that inference in order to successfully complete this act. This, of course, requires the mediation of memory. As such, unless memory is a reliable cognitive faculty, once again we will not be able to arrive at any successful judgments about the soundness of our reasoning. Memory is fallible, of course; however, its fallibility is inconsistent with its reliability, even though there may be cases in which we cannot be sure whether our putative memories are accurate and have no way in practice to correct them if we are not sure.

Finally, if there are to be substantive beliefs about anything, including whether or not we possess knowledge, the premises of argument S have to be substantive in a different sense, i.e. *contentful*, and not merely about abstract objects of the features of experience as such. If the conclusion of the argument is to be substantive, then so will the premises. As such, they will have to assert certain matters of fact concerning our epistemic situation as it actually is. Such premises will include the claims I mentioned earlier: that perceptual errors occur, that we dream, that hallucinations occur, that our cognitive faculties are fallible, and so on. All of these are factual claims, and factual claims that must be knowable for us prior to their functioning as premises in an argument for skepticism such as argument S. However, if the conclusion of argument S is true, it is not possible for us to have any knowledge concerning contingent, substantive, matters of fact such as those just mentioned. If that is so and the conclusion of S is true, then we will never be in a position to assert, *as fact*, any of the contingent, substantive claims that ordinarily function as premises of skeptical arguments. Either we are in a position to affirm these claims as fact, in which case the conclusion of S has to be false, or the conclusion of S is true and we are once again debarred from knowing that the premises of S are true. In that case, the only sorts of claims that could function as the premises of a successful skeptical argument turn out to be unknowable for us on the supposition that the conclusion of argument S is true. As such, they cannot function for us as premises in any argument with a substantive conclusion, including S. Once again, we must conclude that there could not, in principle, be *any* argument that could show that the conclusion of argument S is true. Given this, we are more than justified in dismissing argument S without a hearing.

To put the point more positively we only need to note that in order for us to have evidence for claims such as those mentioned above sufficient to justify our acceptance of them *as fact* already *presupposes* that we possess reliable, even if fallible, cognitive faculties. How do I know, for example, that there are perceptual errors? Obviously, I can know this solely on the basis of the testimony of the senses. How do I know that I sometimes dream? Well, I do *not* know this unless my memories to that effect are the product of a reliable cognitive faculty that testifies to that fact in a manner sufficient to justify my believing it. The same goes for hallucinations. In a similar manner, the claim to the effect that my cognitive faculties are fallible is itself a generalization from specific instances in which I have trusted sense-perception, memory, introspection, or discursive reasoning and they have failed me. However, once again, my acceptance of this generalization on the basis of these instances presupposes that I am in a position to know that these instances really occurred and the states-of-affairs they report actually obtained. In turn, this will be the case only if sense-perception, memory, introspection, and so on, are reliable cognitive faculties capable in principle of justifying claims of this sort. If that is so, these claims cannot be used to derive the conclusion of argument S without either involving us in a contradiction or undermining our claims to know that these premises are true in the first place. In neither case, then, can argument S provide any rational justification for its conclusion, and thus fails to show that reason is incompetent to arrive at any substantive claims about any matters of fact. Once again, we can have good reasons to believe that skepticism is true only on the basis of claims knowable for us only if skepticism is false.

V

Hume assumed that he could legitimately undermine the authority of reason from within by using rational arguments to demonstrate its “fallaciousness and imbecility.” Hume thus clearly supposes that the use of rational argument is as available to the skeptic as it is to his dogmatic opponent and that he can use reason to undermine itself by achieving, at every point, argumentative parity with the dogmatist. In this way, Hume proposes first to undermine our certainty in the deliverances of reason and then by degrees reduce the probability of its claims until they are merely equiprobable to the skeptic’s, at which point neither has any positive probability and both are dismissed and discarded, along with reason itself. To reverse Wittgenstein’s famous image, for the skeptic reason is a ladder we first climb down and then dismantle leaving no way to return to the heights from whence we first came and, having freed ourselves from their baleful influence, content ourselves thereafter to live in the dullness of an ignorance relieved only by smugness and irony.

However, as we have seen at length, such a strategy cannot succeed. The assumptions required for this strategy to succeed are not available to the skeptic and so cannot be borrowed from his dogmatic opponent. Just as we cannot argue from perceptual error to the unreliability of sense-perception, neither can we use rational argument to prove that no rational argument can justify its conclusion. To attempt to “prove” either of these claims undercuts the very premises from which the skeptic must argue and upon which he or she must attempt to justify those them and thus must fail in principle to provide such a proof. Such a strategy is thus stillborn and no threat to the sway or authority of reason simply because a successful argument for skepticism would refute skepticism. In that case, we can never have a successful argument for skepticism even in principle. The global skeptic like Hume can avoid noticing this only through a curious kind of double-mindedness absorbed in an act of special pleading, one that illegitimately exempts his own arguments from the strictures he wants to impose on those of his opponent. Further, the dogmatist’s assumptions concerning the reliability of his or her cognitive faculties (although merely unprovable assumptions) are at least consistent with the hope that successful rational arguments concerning contingent, substantive matters of fact are possible; nor, as we have seen, does the dogmatist need fear that this claim will ever fall to skeptical critique.

I entitled this paper “Why Skepticism Fails.” I did not call it “Why skepticism is False.” For all I have said, skepticism could still be true and dogmatism false: that result is perfectly consistent with the inability of the skeptic to justify his skeptical claims, even in principle. Indeed, if skepticism were to be true, this is exactly what we ought to expect, since our inability to know anything on the basis of discursive reason would entail the same for skeptical arguments as well. So, then, we must not conclude that skepticism is false and dogmatism true on the basis of the foregoing. The failure of skepticism does not prove that we actually possess knowledge. Our belief to that effect is a matter of faith, grounded in the reliability of our cognitive faculties, something that cannot be proved without invidious circularity. As such, the assumptions required for the possibility of successful rational arguments remain just that and the only question remaining is whether these assumptions, as ineluctable and irrefragable as they are even for the consideration of this question, are at last merely gratuitous for us. I have argued elsewhere, along now familiar lines, that these assumptions can only be warranted for us if theism is true and that this, in itself, gives us adequate reason to embrace theism as true. I now invite those readers who have the interest to seriously consider these matters from that point of view.

1. David Hume, Treatise of Human Nature, L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed., Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1888, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hume, ibid., 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hume, *Treatise*, op. cit., [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here I am following Antony Flew, *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961, 93-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hume, *Treatise*, op. cit., 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Of course, if the conclusion of S is true, we cannot even be confident about these sorts of judgments; see immediately below. This point, however, even if admitted will not help the skeptic. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)