

# The Impossibility of Local Skepticism

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Received: 8 June 2006 / Accepted: 13 February 2007 /

Published online: 23 March 2007

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**Abstract** According to global skepticism, we know nothing. According to local skepticism, we know nothing in some particular area or domain of discourse. Unlike their global counterparts, local skeptics think they can contain our invincible ignorance within limited bounds. I argue that they are mistaken. Local skepticism, particularly the kinds that most often get defended, cannot stay local: if there are domains whose truths we cannot know, then there must be claims *outside* those domains that we cannot know even if they are true. My argument focuses on one popular form of local skepticism, ethical skepticism, but I believe that the argument generalizes to cover other forms as well.

**Keywords** Epistemology · Skepticism · Knowledge · Local skepticism · Nihilism · Ethical skepticism · Epistemic closure · Philosophical taxonomy · Charles Landesman · Barry Stroud

## Introduction

According to global skepticism, we know nothing.<sup>1</sup> According to local skepticism, we know nothing in some particular area or domain of discourse. As Barry Stroud remarks, “Scepticism need not always be taken as completely general. It has more typically been restricted to this or that particular kind of alleged knowledge or reasonable belief ....”<sup>2</sup> Charles Landesman writes that “various forms of local skepticism ... have had vast cultural significance and retain philosophical importance,” and he mentions in particular skepticism directed at “restricted domains of human inquiry and interest, such as religion, common-sense belief, ethical and aesthetic value, scientific inference, and the self.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For statements of global skepticism, see, e.g., Descartes, *Meditations I*; Peter Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, 2002); and Keith Lehrer, “Why Not Skepticism?” *The Philosophical Forum* 2 (1971): 289–298.

<sup>2</sup>“Scepticism, ‘Externalism’, and the Goal of Epistemology,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68 (1994): 291–307; 291.

<sup>3</sup>*Skepticism: The Central Issues* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002), pp. 11, x.

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Unlike their global counterparts, local skeptics think they can contain our invincible ignorance within limited bounds. I will argue that they are mistaken. It might seem as if you could limit skepticism to a particular domain, but you cannot: if there are domains whose truths we cannot know, then there must be claims *outside* those domains that we cannot know even if they are true. My argument concentrates on one popular form of local skepticism, ethical skepticism, but I believe it generalizes to cover other forms as well.

Understood as a thesis, skepticism about a domain of discourse is the epistemological claim that no one knows any of the true propositions that the domain may contain.<sup>4</sup> Skeptics about ethics say that no one knows any ethical proposition: no one knows, for instance, that abortion is wrong or that abortion is permissible, even if abortion *is* wrong or even if it *is* permissible. By contrast, *nihilism* about a domain asserts that the domain contains no truths at all, that any propositions belonging to the domain are false. Nihilists about ethics assert the falsity of any ethical propositions there may be – it is false that abortion is wrong, but it is also false that abortion is permissible – perhaps because ethical assertions depend on the allegedly false notion that things possess ethical properties.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, nihilism differs from skepticism; by “local skepticism,” then, I mean non-nihilistic skepticism restricted to a particular domain.<sup>6</sup>

On even casual questioning, people often give the impression of being local skeptics of one sort or another: they reject all claims of knowledge in some, usually controversial, domain while stopping short of skepticism outside the domain and the nihilistic view that the domain contains only hogwash. “Eating meat may be wrong,” they say, “but how could we know? Who’s to say whether it’s wrong? That’s an *ethical* question.” Professional philosophers, moreover, sometimes take their side. For example, Paul Helm apparently regards non-nihilistic ethical skepticism as a stable position when he writes, “Some might take the view that, although there are ethical truths, it is impossible to know which ethical propositions are true and which are false.... Such a person might combine ethical skepticism with a marked lack of skepticism in other areas, science for example.”<sup>7</sup> There are, of

<sup>4</sup>Some skeptics deny the existence of epistemically justified beliefs rather than knowledge, but for simplicity I will concentrate on the denial of knowledge. If, as epistemologists have often maintained, knowledge implies justification but not conversely, then knowledge-denying skepticism is logically weaker than justification-denying skepticism: the latter implies the former but not conversely. Thus, my decision to focus on knowledge makes my case against local skepticism harder rather than easier, since all else equal a logically weaker position is harder to refute. In any case, one can adapt my argument to address justification-denying skepticism without loss of plausibility.

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

<sup>6</sup>Nihilism and skepticism may differ as a stronger proposition differs from a weaker one: If a given domain contains no truths at all, then of course no one knows any truths from the domain, but not conversely. Indeed, skepticism concerning a given domain is at best trivial if combined with the nihilistic view that no propositions in the domain are true. The solipsist, for instance, finds skepticism about the external world uninteresting because she finds it trivially true: “if everything that exists existed only in my own mind, Descartes’s scepticism would lose its sting. It would be no limitation on my knowledge that I did not know of the existence of anything independent of me if there were nothing independent of me” (Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984], p. 129). Perhaps, instead, the two positions are incompatible, as Jonathan Dancy suggests in the context of ethics: “In ethics there is, of course, the view that there are no moral facts to be known or believed at all. This is commonly called moral skepticism, but it should not be, for if there are no relevant facts there is nothing to be ignorant of ....” (“Moral Epistemology,” *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa [Oxford: Blackwell, 1992], p. 286). Perhaps, instead, the positions are logically independent of each other.

<sup>7</sup>Paul Helm, *Belief Policies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 197.

course, famous further examples of local skepticism, including skepticism about other minds, skepticism about induction, and the Kantian claim that the truths of the noumenal realm reside behind a distinctive barrier to our theoretical knowledge. If, however, skepticism cannot stay local, then these positions may all be untenable.

### Non-nihilism

The non-nihilistic nature of local skepticism allows local skeptics to grant that there are truths within the domain of their skepticism, as Helm observes. In other words, an ethical skeptic (for instance) can accept that

(E) At least one ethical proposition is true.

Local skeptics cannot consistently claim to *know* any proposition belonging to the domain, but even so they can consistently *believe* propositions belonging to it – provided, again, that they do not regard their beliefs as attaining the status of knowledge. They can also consistently *refrain* from believing any particular proposition belonging to the domain. But here is the crucial point: Propositions, such as E, merely asserting the existence of truths in a domain, even though they are *about* the domain, do not automatically belong *to* the domain. Countless examples illustrate this point. The assertion that some mathematical propositions are true, while true, is not itself a mathematical proposition; the assertion that some universal generalizations are true, while true, is not itself a universal generalization (even though it is equivalent to the denial of one); the assertion that the domain of propositions I have never entertained contains some truths, while true, is not a proposition I have never entertained. And so on.

It is in fact an understatement that such propositions do not automatically belong to the domains they describe; there are at least two positive reasons to *exclude* such propositions from the domains they describe. First, if a proposition such as E belongs to the domain of ethics, then presumably so does E's wide-scope negation:

(~E) No ethical proposition is true.

There is no reason why merely *asserting the existence* of truths in a domain counts as operating within the domain, while *denying the existence* of such truths does not; if non-nihilism about ethics is itself an ethical assertion, then so is nihilism.<sup>8</sup> In that case, however, nihilism about the domain becomes trivially false: if ~E is an ethical proposition, it is in effect self-refuting. The wide variety of ethical nihilists in the recent history of philosophy would rightly reject this too-quick, taxonomic refutation of their position. Assuming that ethical nihilism is not trivially false, ~E cannot belong to the domain of ethics, and so neither can E. The same lesson applies to any domain about which nihilism is not self-refuting. If we allow that perhaps every distinctively astrological claim is false – for astrology may rest entirely on false presuppositions – then nihilism about astrology cannot count as an astrological claim, and so neither can astrological non-nihilism. If we allow that perhaps every distinctively theological proposition is false – for there is perhaps no God for

<sup>8</sup>I do not mean to imply that ~*p* is an ethical proposition whenever *p* is an ethical proposition; in fact, I believe the contrary: ~*p* is *never* an ethical proposition if *p* is an ethical proposition. I claim, instead, that it is plausible to regard E, in particular, as an ethical proposition only if it is plausible to regard ~E as an ethical proposition. In my view, neither E nor ~E is an ethical proposition.

theology, the “science of God,” to describe – then theological nihilism is not trivially false, in which case it cannot belong to the domain of theology, and neither can its contradictory, theological non-nihilism.<sup>9</sup>

In general, non-nihilism about a domain belongs to the domain only if the domain logically *must* contain truths, because only then will nihilism be self-refuting.<sup>10</sup> Thus I concede that my anti-skeptical strategy has a slightly limited scope: it threatens local skepticism only about domains that logically could lack truths, domains about which nihilism is logically possible. Indeed, my argument in the next section explicitly assumes the logical possibility of nihilism about ethics, the domain I have chosen for purposes of illustration. Fortunately, however, this restricted scope still leaves many kinds of local skepticism potentially in my sights, including the culturally significant and philosophically important kinds to which Landesman alludes: skepticism about theology, ethics, aesthetics, folk psychology, and the theoretical posits of natural science.

A second reason to exclude non-nihilism from the domain stems from the Liar-related semantic paradoxes, which may show that, often on pain of contradiction, meta-level statements – statements about a domain of discourse – cannot belong to the domain itself. One common approach to such paradoxes notes that statements such as

(L) This statement is false.

generate trouble only if we allow them to refer to themselves – either directly, as in L, or indirectly, as in this pair:

(M) The following statement is true.

(N) The previous statement is false.

Suppose, however, that we block such self-reference, because we forbid a statement from belonging to the “level,” or even the “language,” of the statements to which it can refer: L cannot refer to itself; M and N must belong to different levels, and higher-level statements can refer to lower-level statements but not conversely. Then we avoid the trouble these statements would otherwise cause. Some regard this solution to the semantic paradoxes as drastic and *ad hoc*, but it does suggest that logical trouble may arise if we locate non-nihilism about a domain inside the domain itself. Later I consider two reasons one nevertheless might give for locating it inside, neither of them good reasons. Absent good reasons to locate it inside the domain, non-nihilism belongs outside. This result has an important consequence: local skeptics cannot categorically *deny us the knowledge* that non-nihilism is true without extending their skepticism *beyond* the domain, i.e., without making it non-local. The consistent local skeptic, therefore, will not deny us such knowledge.

<sup>9</sup>The modifier “distinctively” is important. The proposition “There are planets,” while accepted by astrologers, is not a distinctively astrological proposition, because orthodox astronomy (among many other discourses) also contains it. By contrast, “One’s Sun sign influences one’s personality” is distinctively astrological, because other kinds of discourse do not contain it. The proposition “The world exists” is commonsensical, not distinctively theological, whereas “God made the world” is distinctive of theology; “God exists, or God does not exist” is logical, not theological, while “God exists” is theological.

<sup>10</sup>Some contend that non-nihilism about a domain belongs to the domain if and only if it is *true*. I reply to this implausible contention in “Moral Conclusions from Nonmoral Premises,” forthcoming in *Hume, ‘Is’ and ‘Ought’*, ed. Charles Pigden (Palgrave Macmillan).

## Wedge Claims

The next element of the argument I call a “wedge claim,” so-called because it has the form of a logical disjunction – often represented by the logical “wedge” symbol, “ $\vee$ ” – and because it provides a wedge with which to pry open skepticism: local skeptics may *allow* knowledge of a wedge claim, or they may *deny* knowledge of it, but either way they will end up abandoning their position. A wedge claim disjoins two propositions: one of them is nihilism about the domain; the other is the logically weakest, or most probable, claim *from* the domain that we can find. Consider, for example, the following wedge claim for ethics:

(W) No ethical proposition is true, or torturing babies just for fun is wrong.<sup>11</sup>

My strategy requires showing that a well-chosen wedge claim is both (a) highly probable and (b) outside the relevant domain of discourse. For purposes of illustration, let us focus on W.

A disjunction such as W is true whenever at least one of its disjuncts is true. Thus, W will be accepted, on reflection, by anyone who accepts either disjunct, and it is difficult indeed to accept *neither* disjunct. Ethical nihilists will accept W because their position is expressed by its first disjunct; ethical non-nihilists will accept W because their ethical standards endorse its second disjunct.<sup>12</sup> The special case of what I will call “non-cognitivism” presents a complication. Recall that nihilism, as I define it, holds that the domain in question contains no true propositions at all, i.e., that any propositions the domain *may* contain are all false. Noncognitivism, as I define it, is a species of nihilism: it holds that the domain contains no true propositions *because* the domain contains no propositions at all.<sup>13</sup> Ethical noncognitivists, for instance, insist that remarks such as “Torturing babies just for fun is wrong” do not express propositions, and so are neither true nor false, because there are no ethical propositions for such remarks to express. Thus, they are likely to regard W as disjoining ethical nihilism, which they accept, with an utterance having no truth-value at all. If they accept a disjunction only when they regard both of its disjuncts as at least truth-valued, ethical noncognitivists will reject W. But even if noncognitivists have a principled reason for rejecting wedge claims, local skeptics do not. Noncognitivism implies nihilism: a domain containing no propositions contains no true propositions. So local skeptics, being non-nihilistic, cannot reject W on the basis of noncognitivism.

<sup>11</sup>Proposition W disjoins a “second-order” semantic claim with a “first-order” ethical claim; if such a combination seems logically illicit, we can replace W with a disjunction of two semantic claims,

(W') No ethical proposition is true, or “Torturing babies just for fun is wrong” is true, modifying the rest of the argument accordingly.

<sup>12</sup>Among non-nihilists, consequentialists will accept W because they think recreational baby-torture produces a net balance of unfavorable over favorable consequences, to say the least. Deontologists will accept W because they think that we have a duty not to torture babies just for fun; or that torturing babies just for fun involves treating humanity merely as means or violating another form of the categorical imperative; or that it (further) brutalizes the torturer. What about the particular kind of deontologists known as “divine-command” theorists? Might they reject W? Now, not everyone accepts every highly probable claim, and so W can be highly probable even if divine-command theorists reject it. But my hunch is that divine-command theorists would in fact accept W. They believe that, if God exists (or were to exist), then surely God has willed (or would will) that we not torture babies just for fun. Even hedonistic act-utilitarians, who allow that some torturers might derive enough pleasure from baby-torture to outweigh the suffering it causes, will accept W if “wrong” is construed as “defeasibly wrong.”

<sup>13</sup>If this usage of the term does not fit some who call themselves “noncognitivists,” consider it a merely stipulative usage.

In effect, a wedge claim says that if any proposition from the domain is true, it is the paradigmatic proposition identified in the claim. If the paradigm is well-chosen, one can find the wedge claim highly probable without in fact accepting either nihilism *or* non-nihilism. For instance, a cognitivist about ethics can remain on the fence between ethical nihilism and non-nihilism and still reason as follows: “If nihilism is true, then W must be true, and if nihilism is false, then W is very probably true; at worst, then, W is very probably true.” A well-chosen wedge claim exhibits stability: the less probable you consider one of its disjuncts, the more probable you should consider the other. If, however, you do not find W as it stands highly probable, substitute for its second disjunct whichever proposition tops your own list of the most obvious candidates for ethical truth. (Any ethical *non*-nihilist will have a likely candidate, and, again, nihilists aren’t skeptics of the kind I am confronting.) Granted, local skeptics cannot consistently accept the nihilistic disjunct of a wedge claim, and they cannot consistently allow knowledge of the other disjunct, but those facts do not mean that they cannot allow knowledge of the disjunction itself. It is a commonplace that one can know a disjunction without accepting, let alone knowing, either one of its disjuncts and even while denying one of its disjuncts, as in the disjunctions “It will rain today, or it will not” and “Bach is a great composer, or no one is.”

Not only can local skeptics allow knowledge of wedge claims; they have no principled reason to disallow such knowledge. For wedge claims are not only highly probable but are also *provably outside* their domains of discourse. The proof has three premises.<sup>14</sup> First, no proposition belongs to a given domain if it is consistent with nihilism concerning that domain: obviously, any proposition nihilists can consistently accept cannot belong to the domain of their nihilism. Second, nihilists can consistently accept wedge claims: wedge claims for a domain are compatible with nihilism about the domain, assuming (as I admit I must) that nihilism about the domain is not itself impossible. Could ethical nihilists, for instance, consistently accept W, the wedge claim I offered for ethics? Sure: their nihilism already commits them to the first disjunct in W, and if they regard the second disjunct as truth-valued and so false, they can and indeed must accept W. It follows from those two premises that, in at least one possible world, W falls outside the domain of ethics. Third, a proposition’s status as outside a domain is an essential feature of it: if there is any possible world in which W falls outside the domain of ethics, it does so in every possible world in which it exists.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, W, existing in the actual world, is actually outside ethics.

<sup>14</sup>Here is the proof more formally. As before, let “~E” represent ethical nihilism, and let “B” abbreviate “W belongs to the domain of ethics”:

- (1)  $\sim \diamond((W \ \& \ \sim E) \ \& \ B)$
- (2)  $\diamond(W \ \& \ \sim E)$
- (3) Therefore:  $\diamond \sim B$  [From (1), (2)]
- (4)  $\diamond \sim B \supset \sim B$
- (5) Therefore:  $\sim B$  [From (3), (4)]

Premise (1) is uncontroversial. Premise (2) presupposes that (a) W is logically possible and (b) ~E is logically possible. If not (a), then *no one* can consistently accept wedge claims; if not (b), then nihilists cannot consistently accept *anything*, including nihilism. Presumably, (a) implies that noncognitivism is not necessarily true, since noncognitivism implies that W is not true (because neither true nor false).

<sup>15</sup>This assumption has been challenged; see Toomas Karmo, “Some Valid (But No Sound) Arguments Trivially Span the ‘Is’-‘Ought’ Gap,” *Mind* 97 (1988): 252–257; I. L. Humberstone, “A Study in Philosophical Taxonomy,” *Philosophical Studies* 83 (1996): 121–169; 158 n.32. These challenges fail, as I argue in “Closing the ‘Is’-‘Ought’ Gap,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 28:3 (1998): 349–366, and in “Moral Conclusions from Nonmoral Premises.”

More generally, the nihilistic disjunct in any wedge claim guarantees that the wedge claim falls outside the domain. This result accords with an independent intuition that skepticism about a wedge claim implies non-local skepticism. If, for instance, we do not know *W*, then not only are we ignorant *in* ethics; we are importantly ignorant *about* ethics: we don't know what ethical truths would look like if there were any. Such ignorance about ethics is ignorance beyond the domain of ethics. Likewise, the following wedge claim for astrology,

(W\*) No astrological claim is true, or one's Sun sign influences one's personality,

is a (boringly obvious) claim *about* astrology, not *of* astrology, and astrological skeptics do not deny knowledge about astrology, such as the knowledge that it's big business. Anyone who fails to know *W\** lacks not only astrological knowledge but also knowledge about how the astrology game is played: the second disjunct in *W\** is more or less *constitutive* of astrology. Indeed, knowledge about astrology allows even nihilists, who deny that there are astrological truths, to rank some astrological claims as *better candidates* for truth than others; the wedge claim *W\**, for instance, stands a better chance of being true than the more specific claim

(S) No astrological claim is true, or anyone whose Sun sign is Taurus is greedy,

even if neither claim stands much chance of it. In sum, a wedge claim's high probability gives local skeptics some reason to *grant* us knowledge of it, and its falling outside the associated domain deprives local skeptics of any reason to *deny* us knowledge of it. If that balance of reasons persuades local skeptics, as it should, to *grant* that we can know wedge claims, they are but a short step from giving up local skepticism.

## Epistemic Closure

From the set consisting of non-nihilism and an associated wedge claim, we can deduce a paradigmatic claim from the domain of discourse: for example, from the set consisting of *E* ("At least one ethical proposition is true") and *W* ("No ethical proposition is true, or torturing babies just for fun is wrong") we can deduce

(T) Torturing babies just for fun is wrong.

Again, this deduction assumes that wedge claims contain two truth-valued disjuncts, an assumption noncognitivists would dispute but local skeptics must grant: rejecting nihilism, local skeptics must reject noncognitivism; even adopting an *agnostic* attitude toward noncognitivism (i.e., denying that anyone knows its truth-value) would commit them to skepticism outside the domain. Local skeptics will also typically grant that we can *know* the validity of such an obvious deduction.<sup>16</sup> Skeptics about ethics, for instance, typically do not also express skepticism about basic logic; on their view, something about ethics *in particular* demands a skeptical attitude.

<sup>16</sup>“Relevant” logicians may reject the deduction because it relies on disjunctive syllogism, which they regard as invalid. But they are hardly *skeptics* about deduction: they do not think that we simply fail to *know* that disjunctive syllogism is valid.

Thus, we have found three propositions that local skeptics have some reason to concede that we know and no reason to deny that we know: non-nihilism, an associated wedge claim, and the fact those two propositions imply a claim from the domain of discourse. Ethical skeptics have reason to allow, and no reason to deny, that we know  $\{E, W\}$  and that we know we can deduce  $T$  from  $\{E, W\}$ . But according to a weak version of the “epistemic closure” principle, whoever knows a set of propositions  $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\}$  and who believes  $Q$  by known deduction from  $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\}$  can thereby know  $Q$ . Add epistemic closure, then, and our having those three items of knowledge allows us to have a fourth: knowledge that the paradigmatic ethical claim  $T$  is true. Obviously, ethical skeptics cannot grant us *that* knowledge without abandoning ethical skepticism.

To avoid granting us knowledge in the domain, local skeptics could deny the epistemic closure principle, but it would cost them their local skepticism. Here’s why. Presumably, I could not come to know, without inference, that I am not a brain in a vat being deceived (as the skeptical story goes) into believing that I have a body. Not even as staunch an anti-skeptic as G. E. Moore would claim that I can know I am not a brain in a vat without deducing it from something *else* I know, e.g., that I have hands. After all, the skeptic has deliberately contrived the scenario so as to make it impossible for me to apprehend its falsity directly – say, by merely opening my eyes and “seeing” that it is false. Even if I have direct knowledge of my hands, I must deduce from that knowledge to the known falsity of the skeptic’s scenario. I face this restriction even, it seems, on pure externalist theories of knowledge, since it is hard to imagine a reliable mechanism for *non*-inferentially producing belief in the falsity of skeptical scenarios – perhaps because direct perception is a causal process, and a non-event such as the *absence* or *falsity* of a skeptical scenario is not something that can start a causal chain. One might defend the direct perception of absence by saying, for instance, “You can see, just by looking, *that your keys are not on the table*,” but in the typical case that same visual impression also reveals *that a hedgehog is not on the table*, yet typically you do not even entertain the latter proposition. Why not, since direct perception that your keys are not on the table would equally be direct perception that a hedgehog isn’t either? The answer is that you *infer* absence, rather than directly perceiving it, and you draw one of indefinitely many valid inferences depending on your interests at the time. By the same token, then, I can know I am not a brain in a vat only if I can infer that knowledge from something else I know, and thus I cannot know I am not a brain in a vat unless the principle of epistemic closure, as I have formulated it, holds. (We can dismiss the nakedly *ad hoc* reply that closure holds for the purpose of refuting skeptical scenarios but not for the purpose of deriving knowledge in the local skeptic’s domain.)

Thus, if local skeptics wish to avoid skepticism that extends all the way to the truth or falsity of radical skeptical scenarios, they must grant that we at least *can* obtain knowledge by known deduction from existing knowledge. I do not mean to suggest that those who reject epistemic closure have no good arguments against it.<sup>17</sup> I claim only two things. First, rejecting epistemic closure as formulated here commits one to asserting that I cannot know the falsity of the brain-in-a-vat scenario or, indeed, any similar skeptical scenario; second, any position that implies my inability to know the falsity of such skeptical scenarios goes beyond *local* skepticism of the kinds many people find attractive. Typical skeptics about

<sup>17</sup>On the contrary, I offer evidence against epistemic closure in “The Knower Paradox and Epistemic Closure,” *Synthese* 114:2 (1998): 337–354.



ethics, for instance, would insist – correctly, in my view – that they *do* know they are not brains in vats, but they are correct in that knowledge-claim only if epistemic closure holds. In order to stay local, then, local skeptics need epistemic closure.

Local skepticism thus allows its opponents the means to refute it: knowledge of non-nihilism, knowledge of wedge claims, knowledge of valid deduction, and epistemic closure, a bridge from those items of knowledge to the very knowledge local skepticism denies. Genuinely local skepticism fails to block premises that imply the possibility of knowledge within the domain, and any attempt to block those premises makes the skepticism non-local. Again, local skeptics differ from global skeptics by conceding that, although we cannot know whatever truths may reside in some problematic domain, truths *outside* the domain present no special epistemic obstacle. In fact, however, they can deny us knowledge within the domain only by denying us knowledge outside it.

In sum, my strategy confronts local skeptics with a dilemma. Either they accept epistemic closure, or they do not. If they do not, then they deny us knowledge of the falsity of skeptical scenarios, and so their skepticism goes beyond the local domain. Granted, it may not go far beyond the domain in *quantitative* terms, since the propositions they allow us to know still outnumber the skeptical scenarios whose falsity they bar us from knowing. But it goes far beyond the domain in *qualitative* terms: most self-styled ethical skeptics, for instance, would recoil from having to admit, as the price of their skepticism, that they don't know they're not brains in vats, victims of an evil demon, merely dreaming, and suchlike. On the other hand, if they accept epistemic closure, then they must, in order to save their skepticism, deny us knowledge of particular propositions that *imply* members of the domain, and in denying us that knowledge they go beyond the domain. Either way, they go beyond it.

## Objections

The burden of proof, as I suggested earlier, rests with critics who insist that non-nihilism about a domain belongs *inside* the domain – who insist, for example, that proposition E is an ethical proposition. Here I wish to rebut two reasons they might give to overcome that burden. First, they might argue, (a) E is incompatible with ethical nihilism ( $\sim E$ ), and (b) any proposition incompatible with ethical nihilism must be an ethical proposition. While (a) is certainly true, (b) is certainly false. A domain *excludes* every proposition *compatible* with nihilism, but it does not *include* every proposition *incompatible* with nihilism. The proposition

(R) Some red things are colorless

is incompatible with  $\sim E$ , because R is incompatible with everything, yet R remains entirely non-ethical. One might amend the objection to state that any *logically possible* proposition incompatible with  $\sim E$  is an ethical proposition, but the amended objection runs into a different problem: if it is correct, then the logically possible proposition

(G) God believes that T

ends up as ethical, since, on the traditional concept of God, G entails the ethical proposition T and thus entails E. But the mere claim that God believes some ethical proposition – a claim in the first instance about God's psychology – is not *itself* an ethical claim, even though it entails one. Or consider the logically possible disjunction

(C) Goldbach's Conjecture is true, or T.

None of us knows the truth-value of Goldbach's Conjecture, but its falsity, and thus its impossibility, would not automatically make C an ethical proposition, even though in that case C and T would be strictly equivalent. Regardless of the Conjecture's truth-value, we have no more reason to classify C as ethical than to classify C as mathematical, and surely it is not both of those; it is neither. While we may never know the truth-value of Goldbach's Conjecture, it seems odd to say that we might never know the proper classification of C; on the contrary, we can classify C as non-ethical without knowing which, if either, of its disjuncts makes it true.<sup>18</sup> By the same token, then, the fact that T and {E, W} are strictly equivalent does not force {E, W} into the domain of ethics, and so we avoid begging the question against the ethical skeptic when claiming to know {E, W}.

Second, one might object that E is an ethical proposition because E is *equivalent to the disjunction* of all the ethical propositions there are. This objection appears to depend on three assumptions: (1) any disjunction of ethical propositions is itself an ethical proposition; (2) anything equivalent to an ethical proposition is itself an ethical proposition; and (3) there is an exhaustive disjunction of all the ethical propositions. Assumptions (1) and (3) are incompatible, for the exhaustive disjunction posited by assumption (3),

(D)  $P_1 \vee P_2 \vee P_3 \vee \dots$ ,

will, by assumption (1), itself be an ethical proposition, and so D will have to appear in the exhaustive disjunction of all the ethical propositions, thus giving us

(D\*)  $D \vee P_1 \vee P_2 \vee P_3 \vee \dots$ .

But then D\* contains an ethical proposition not present in D, and so, contrary to (3), D is not exhaustive after all. Thus, (1) and (3) cannot both be true, and so the objection rests on at least one false assumption.<sup>19</sup>

The objector can avoid this particular *reductio* by claiming, instead, that (1\*) any disjunction of *atomic* ethical propositions is itself an ethical proposition, since in that case the disjunction itself cannot number among its own disjuncts. Still, the objection depends on an assumption we have already seen reason to reject: (2) anything equivalent to an ethical proposition is itself an ethical proposition. The dialectic has become complicated, but we have seen no good reason to include non-nihilism about a domain inside the domain itself and some reason to exclude it.

A third objection concerns our *knowledge* of non-nihilism rather than its taxonomic status. It holds that we cannot know that a domain contains truths without first knowing some truth or other *from* the domain; we cannot, for instance, acquire the metaethical knowledge that some ethical propositions are true without first acquiring the very ethical knowledge that ethical skepticism denies. This objection invites three replies. First, there is no logical impediment to knowing that a domain contains truths without first knowing some particular truth from the domain. Gödel showed that the domain of arithmetically unprovable statements of arithmetic contains infinitely many truths, and he did so without

<sup>18</sup>For a defense of this claim, see "Moral Conclusions from Nonmoral Premises." Unfortunately, the non-ethical status of a disjunction such as C is not as easy to establish as the non-ethical status of a wedge claim such as W, which explains the need for wedge claims in my case against local skepticism.

<sup>19</sup>John Schellenberg has suggested to me an independent reason for rejecting assumption (1): not every disjunction of ethical propositions is "action-guiding"; if an ethical proposition must be action-guiding, then an infinite disjunction of ethical propositions will probably not itself be an ethical proposition.

his or anyone else's having to know a truth from that domain.<sup>20</sup> Second, both non-nihilism and the wedge claim ought to be *at least* as knowable as any proposition from the domain. Non-nihilism is at least as likely as any proposition from the domain: it is derivable from any such proposition, but none of them are derivable from it. A wedge claim is a disjunction one of whose disjuncts is the most probable proposition from the domain we can find – a proposition “which has got to be true” if anything in the domain is true; the wedge claim is therefore at least as likely as the likeliest proposition from the domain and so at least as likely as *any* proposition from the domain. Third, the objection concedes my point in any case: If knowing non-nihilism required prior knowledge of some proposition from the domain, then skepticism about the domain would imply skepticism beyond the domain.

Fourth, one might raise the “Who cares?” objection: “Even if otherwise-local skeptics must deny us knowledge of non-nihilism or deny us knowledge of wedge claims, how is that result interesting? It should not surprise us if skeptics about a domain who accept epistemic closure must deny us not only knowledge of propositions *within* the domain but also knowledge of whatever is known to *imply* such propositions.” In reply, even if it is “unsurprising” that would-be local skeptics must deny us that second kind of knowledge, it is significant that such knowledge falls *outside* what they always took to be the scope of their skepticism. Local skeptics claim that something about a given domain makes even the true propositions it may contain *distinctively unknowable*. Stroud puts it this way:

Skepticism is most illuminating when restricted to particular areas of knowledge ... because it then rests on distinctive and problematic features of the alleged knowledge in question, not simply on some completely general conundrum in the notion of knowledge itself, or in the very idea of reasonable belief.<sup>21</sup>

Despite Stroud's praise for local skepticism, despite its general prevalence, and despite Landesman's observation about its “vast cultural significance,” I have argued against the very possibility of the position: there cannot be epistemically problematic domains – at least none of a nontrivial sort and concerning which nihilism is logically possible.<sup>22</sup>

Suppose, however, that local skeptics grant that technical point but try to take it on board by simply adding non-nihilism to the domain of their skepticism: “You've shown,” they admit, “that non-nihilism itself must belong to what we now concede is an impure skeptical domain.” So, for instance, ethical skeptics add proposition E (“At least one ethical proposition is true”) to the domain of propositions we cannot know. “But,” they insist, “there it stops: all and only the members of this new domain are the targets of our expanded ethical skepticism.” At that point, of course, I can resume my critique by taking non-nihilism about the expanded ethical domain,

<sup>20</sup>Does Gödel's theorem then imply a stable form of local skepticism about the domain “arithmetically unprovable statements of arithmetic”? Not unless knowledge of any arithmetical truth requires its provability within arithmetic, a quite doubtful assumption; for without that assumption, the wedge claim “The domain contains no truths, or [insert paradigm] is true” will not imply the clearly *false* disjunction “The domain contains no truths, or [insert paradigm] is provable.” Moreover, such Gödelian local skepticism is more arcane and artificial than the kinds of local skepticism that possess what Landesman (note 3 above), calls “vast cultural significance.” By the same token, local skepticism about the domain of *unknowable truths* (assuming that domain is non-empty) is trivially immune to my attack, but it attracts no skeptical interest since of course no one has ever wanted to *claim* knowledge in a domain thus labeled—everyone must be a “skeptic” about *that* domain.

<sup>21</sup>“Scepticism, ‘Externalism’, and the Goal of Epistemology,” p. 291.

<sup>22</sup>See again note 20 and Section 2: “Non-Nihilism.”

(E\*) At least one proposition in the expanded ethical domain is true,  
and disjoining its negation with E to produce a new wedge claim:

(W\*\*) No proposition in the expanded ethical domain is true, or E is true.

Unlike W or W\*, W\*\* is not merely probable but analytically true: the expanded ethical domain consists of ethical propositions and another proposition, E, that is implied by every ethical proposition; if, therefore, either disjunct in W\*\* is false, the other disjunct must as a matter of logic be true. For reasons already given, neither E\* nor W\*\* belongs to the expanded domain, and, again, local skeptics must grant epistemic closure in order to keep their skepticism local. To stave off defeat, they will feel the same pressure as before to burst the domain by adding E\* to it – and so on, indefinitely. They cannot make good on their declaration “But there it stops”; no skeptical domain stays put.

“Even so,” my opponent may reply, “you haven’t shown that local skeptics must become *global* skeptics; ethical skeptics, for instance, can also be skeptics about astrology without becoming skeptical about everything.” Now, concerning astrology, nihilism rather than skepticism is the sensible position, but let’s play along; ethical skeptics who try to confine their further skepticism to astrology will find they can’t. Their attempt at confinement will leave them no principled grounds for denying knowledge of either non-nihilism concerning astrology or a suitable wedge claim, such as W\*, and they dare not deny epistemic closure. But then they fail to deny the means for achieving knowledge in astrology.

Fifth, and finally, one might object to the presumption that domains of discourse have well-defined boundaries, insisting that there is sometimes no objective fact concerning whether a proposition belongs to a given domain, or, more strongly, that it is *never* objectively true that a proposition belongs to one domain rather than another. But, of course, this objection cannot help the local skeptic, whose position *depends* on distinguishing among domains. For any well-defined local domain (of a relevant and nontrivial sort), I have suggested, it proves impossible to confine one’s skepticism to that domain. It may remain possible to avoid going all the way to global skepticism, but there will be at least some pressure in that direction, a fact that even the “Who cares?” objector may find interesting.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>For many helpful comments, I thank Andrew Graham, Christoph Kelp, and audiences at Acadia University, Dalhousie University, and the University of Stirling.