

SKEPTICAL EFFECTIVENESS: A REPLY TO BUFORD AND BRUECKNER

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ABSTRACT

In an earlier paper, I presented a novel objection to closure-based skeptical arguments. There I argued that the best account of what makes skeptical scenarios effective cripples the closure-based skeptical arguments that use those scenarios. On behalf of the skeptic, Christopher Buford and Anthony Brueckner have replied to my objection. Here I review my original argument, criticize their replies, and highlight two important issues for further investigation.

In Murphy (2013), I presented a novel objection to familiar skeptical arguments that use skeptical scenarios. Christopher Buford and Anthony Brueckner (2015) have responded to my objection on behalf of the skeptic. Here I recap my original argument, respond to Buford and Brueckner's central points, and identify two issues that deserve more attention in the skepticism literature.

My argument in the earlier article had three steps. Starting with the stipulation that a skeptical scenario is effective vis-à-vis a person's belief as long as it triggers familiar skeptical worries that the belief does not amount to knowledge, I distinguished two accounts of effective skeptical scenarios. On the false belief account, a skeptical scenario effectively targets a belief only if that belief is false in that scenario. On the ignorance account, a skeptical scenario effectively targets a belief only if that belief falls short of the knowledge mark in that scenario. I provided three reasons to favor the ignorance account over the false belief account.

First there are effective scenarios in which the targeted belief is true, but falls short of the knowledge mark. One is the busy deceiver scenario.¹ It starts a deceiver who is too busy to oversee the moment-to-moment changes in a brain in a vat's immediate environment. Consequently this deceiver programs the computer to cause a full week of experiences in the brain in a vat. Occasionally this allows the brain in a vat to form a true belief: for example, when the brain in a vat has experiences that suggest that he is talking to his best friend, and infers from this that there is someone in the room with him. Imagine all of this occurs while the janitor happens to be in the vat room emptying the trash, something that makes the brain in a vat's inferred belief true. This scenario is nonetheless effective: when I believe, on a similar basis, that there is someone in the room with me, and I consider the possibility that I am the brain in a vat just described, this triggers the worry that maybe I don't know there is someone in the room with me. So one advantage the ignorance account has over the false belief account concerns *the range of effective scenarios*.

Second, the ignorance account is more parsimonious than the false belief account. Continuing with the brain in a vat scenario, both the false belief account and the ignorance account posit the brain in a vat hook up. But the false belief account also posits falsemakers for the targeted beliefs, whereas the ignorance account need not. In this way, the ignorance account earns its effectiveness with fewer posits. So a second advantage that the ignorance account has over the false belief account is one of *parsimony*.

¹ Murphy 2013: 275.

Third, the false belief account predicts that there are no skeptical scenarios that effectively target beliefs in necessary truths. But correct arithmetical beliefs, for example, can be effectively targeted with scenarios in which the processes that produce them are generally unreliable, or with scenarios in which numbers do not stand in the relations to our beliefs that are required for knowledge (a la Benaceraff). These scenarios are certified as skeptically effective by the ignorance account, but not by the false belief account. So a third advantage that the ignorance account has over the false belief account concerns *the range of targeted beliefs*.²

The second step in my argument focused on the ignorance account's implications for familiar closure-based skeptical arguments.³ Let h be some ordinary proposition that we initially take someone to know, and let sk be a skeptical scenario that is effective vis-à-vis that person's belief that h . Here is the familiar argument:

$$(1) [Kh \ \& \ K(h \supset \sim sk)] \supset K\sim sk$$

$$(2) \sim K\sim sk$$

² Defenders of the false belief account might try appealing to metaphysically impossible skeptical scenarios; in such a scenario, one's belief in a necessary truth is false. For a helpful discussion of this kind of appeal, see Beebe (2010). While there are complicated issues here, this strategy gives rise to another parsimony problem for the false belief account since it requires making use of impossible scenarios in addition to possible scenarios. By contrast, the ignorance account can, in the ways I have suggested, target beliefs in necessary truths without any need for impossible scenarios.

³ In my (2013), I also argued that the ignorance account forces similar revisions, and a similar weakening, of underdetermination-based skeptical arguments. Buford and Brueckner only criticize what I say about the closure-based skeptical argument, so that is what I focus on here.

(3) $K(h \supset \sim sk)$

(4) $So, \sim Kh$

I focused on the much neglected (3). To many, (3) has seemed innocuous. But, as I pointed out, it presupposes the false belief account by the following reasoning. Since knowledge is factive, (3) entails $h \supset \sim sk$. But $h \supset \sim sk$ is equivalent to $sk \supset \sim h$; and the latter says that in the skeptical scenario, the believed h is false.

The third step explored how the skeptic might revise (3) to avoid commitment to the false belief account. The obvious fix is to move from (3) to

(3*) $K(Kh \supset \sim sk)$

(3*) does not presuppose the false belief account. It allows the skeptic to use scenarios that involve true beliefs that fall short of the knowledge mark. To see this, just reason as before. By the factivity of knowledge and contraposition, (3*) entails $sk \supset \sim Kh$. But $sk \supset \sim Kh$ just requires that the skeptical scenario involve a failure to know the targeted ordinary claim; it does not require that the person have a false belief about that claim. I then pointed out that if the skeptic moves from (3) to (3*), then other parts of the (1)-(4) argument will need to be revised if the argument is to be valid. First, given the move from (3) to (3*), it is natural to move from (1) to (1*) below. But then another revision, from (4) to (4*), is needed to make the argument valid. The resulting argument is:

(1*) $[KKh \ \& \ K(Kh \supset \sim sk)] \supset K\sim sk$

(2) $\sim K\sim sk$

(3*) $K(Kh \supset \sim sk)$

(4*) $So, \sim KKh$

The dagger strikes here since (4*) is far weaker than (4). (4*) just says we fail to know that we know. And this is far less significant than the original (4), which charges us with a lack of first-order knowledge. Of course, one way to resist this argument is to concede the move from (3) to (3*), but resist revising (4) to (4*). In a moment, we will look at Buford and Brueckner's suggestion for doing this.

But first I want to look at their opening criticism. It takes aim at my step two:

Does the closure argument presuppose the truth of the false-belief account? This depends on the type of *presupposition* in question. One interpretation of Murphy's concern is that since (3) presupposes the false belief account, (3) is true only if the false belief account is true. And since the false belief account is mistaken, (3) itself is false and the closure-based skeptical argument is in trouble. However, this can't be right, since (3) is clearly *true*. The argument must then presuppose the truth of the false belief account in some other fashion, given the evident *truth* of (3).⁴

My reply is simple. (3) is *not* an evident truth. Indeed it is false when the skeptical scenario used in (3) is one where the subject has a true belief but fails to know.

Consider the busy deceiver scenario again. The relevant instance of (3) is

(3-bd) I know that if there is someone in the room with me then I am not a

⁴ Buford and Brueckner, 2015: 58.

victim of a busy deceiver scenario.

(3-bd) is false. The supporting argument follows the earlier pattern: by the factivity of knowledge and contraposition, (3-bd) entails that if I am the victim of a busy deceiver scenario, then there is no one in the room with me. But, as we saw, this last conditional is false.

But what about skeptical scenarios that involve false beliefs? As Buford and Brueckner emphasize, instances of (3) that cite such scenarios are true. And so the revisions to the skeptical argument that I outlined, the revisions are not triggered that culminate in the weak conclusion that denies knowing that one knows.

Still the point about effectiveness is correct: false belief scenarios are effective in virtue of those beliefs falling short of the knowledge mark, and not in virtue of those beliefs being false. So a key question is this: is it true, as Buford and Brueckner seem to think, that the best account of effective skeptical scenarios has no implications for the cogency of the arguments that those skeptical scenarios figure into?

I think there is good reason to think that the best account of effective skeptical scenarios does bear on the cogency of the skeptical arguments that those scenarios figure into. In support of this, I offer a three-step argument. The first step consists in this unity claim: all effective skeptical scenarios are effective in virtue of the same defect that attaches to the targeted belief. Buford and Brueckner grant this claim.⁵ Conjoin to this the claim that, at least in some cases, like that of the busy

⁵ Buford and Brueckner 2015: 56, fn 1.

deceiver scenario, that defect is the belief's failure to meet the knowledge mark. It follows from these two premises that all effective scenarios are effective in virtue of the targeted belief's falling short of the knowledge mark.⁶

The second step introduces the following *ceteris paribus* claim: when all else is the same between a skeptical argument that makes use of a false belief scenario and a skeptical argument that makes use of a scenario with a true belief that falls short of the knowledge mark, those arguments are equally cogent. The support for this premise is simple: we should not expect the only difference between two such arguments, namely the respective skeptical scenarios that they use, to make for a difference in the cogency of those arguments since it is the exact same feature that makes each scenario skeptically effective. From this *ceteris paribus* claim and the conclusion of the first step, it follows that any two such skeptical arguments are equally cogent.

The final step of the argument uses as a premise the earlier claim that skeptical arguments that make use of scenarios involving true beliefs that do not amount to knowledge can at best only show a failure to know that one knows. Earlier I reviewed my support for this claim; and Buford and Brueckner do not take issue with it. From this, and the conclusion of the second step (recall this is the claim that any two such skeptical arguments are equally cogent), it follows that skeptical arguments that use

⁶ So false belief scenarios mask the source of their own effectiveness: they are not effective in virtue of the belief's being false, but rather in virtue of the belief's falling short of the knowledge mark. This is relevant to both (2) and (3) of the closure-based skeptical argument.

false belief scenarios have the same limitation. They too can at best only show a failure to know that one knows.

It is important to be clear about what this three-step argument is intended to show. It is intended to support the following integration thesis: if identifying the correct account of effective skeptical scenarios leads to the discovery that some closure-based skeptical arguments can only establish a weak conclusion, then *all* closure-based skeptical arguments can only establish that same weak conclusion. The argument is *not* intended to provide us with a *diagnosis* of closure-based skeptical arguments that employ false belief scenarios. It is not intended to tell us which premise in those arguments is false, or whether the inferences in those arguments are somehow invalid. While admittedly this does not give us everything we want, this is not a reason to reject the argument. Since it is a general truth that *knowledge that* does not require *knowledge why*, we should not be troubled if we have landed in a place where we know that a class of skeptical arguments are unsound without knowing why they are unsound.

Let's turn to Buford and Brueckner's other point. The closest they come to a positive recommendation for revising the skeptical argument in response to the move to the ignorance account is their suggestion that the skeptic revise (3) to (3*), and not make any other revision to the original closure-based skeptical argument.⁷ This will

⁷ See Buford and Brueckner, 2015: 59, though it is not entirely clear whether Buford and Brueckner want to defend the resulting skeptical argument. Earlier at p. 58, they consider a revision that replaces (1) in the skeptical argument with the following principle from Barry Stroud: $[K_h \ \& \ K(K_h \supset \sim sk)] \supset K\sim sk$. But they reject this

allow the skeptic to recruit scenarios that involve true beliefs that fall short of the knowledge mark, and yet still conclude with denials of first-order knowledge. Here then is their suggested argument:

$$(1) [Kh \ \& \ K \ (h \supset \sim sk)] \supset K \sim sk$$

$$(2) \sim K \sim sk$$

$$(3^*) K \ (Kh \supset \sim sk)$$

$$(4) \text{ So, } \sim Kh$$

This won't work. To see that the skeptic cannot move from (3) to (3*), without revising any other claims in the original closure-based skeptical argument, notice that (3*) does not simply repeat the second conjunct in the antecedent of (1). This makes the argument invalid. It can be made valid though if (3*) entails the second conjunct in the antecedent of (1). That is, it will be valid if the argument is supplemented with this additional premise: $[K \ (Kh \supset \sim sk)] \supset [K \ (h \supset \sim sk)]$. But Buford and Brueckner provide no reasons in support of this last claim. And anyway, it is false. Consider the busy deceiver scenario again. I know this conditional: if I know there is someone in the room with me, then I'm not in the busy deceiver scenario. But I don't know this second conditional: if there is someone in the room with me, then I'm not in the busy deceiver scenario. I don't know the second because it is false – as we saw there can be someone in the room with me even if I'm in the

principle, and thus this revision strategy, on the grounds that the principle from Stroud entails the KK principle.

busy deceiver scenario. So we should reject Buford and Brueckner's proposed revision.

I end by highlighting two topics that we have met along the way. Both need more work. One is the integration issue. Exactly how should the best account of the effectiveness of skeptical scenarios inform the details of the skeptical arguments that incorporate skeptical scenarios? What are the exact desiderata of this integration? The other topic that needs more work is (3) in the closure-based skeptical argument. This is the under-investigated claim that if one knows the targeted proposition, then one knows that they are not in the relevant skeptical scenario. I argued that this claim is false when the targeted belief happens to be true in the skeptical scenario. This premise needs to be investigated more thoroughly for other unnoticed problems.⁸

References

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⁸ Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful comments.