

Effective Sceptical Hypotheses

by

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Abstract: The familiar Cartesian sceptical arguments all involve an explanation of our experiences. An account of the persuasive power of the sceptical arguments should explain why this is so. This supports a diagnosis of the error in Cartesian sceptical arguments according to which they mislead us into regarding our perceptual beliefs as if they were justified as inferences to the best explanation. I argue that they have instead a perceptual justification that does not involve inference to the best explanation and that should not be put in doubt by the sceptical hypotheses.

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DESCARTES' SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS are presented as brief sketches of hypothetical explanations of the speaker's ordinary sensory experiences. One such explanation is that I am now dreaming. Another is that my experiences are produced by a demon who aims to deceive me as much as possible. A modern variant suggests that I might be a brain in a vat, receiving artificially generated neurochemical input. Why are these possibilities of error presented as explanations of experiences? Recently popular accounts of the Cartesian sceptical arguments do not explain why sceptical arguments should be presented as explanations, but an account suggested some years ago by the author does (Reynolds, 1998).

The Cartesian arguments seem to show, from premises acceptable to commonsense, that we lack ordinary perceptual knowledge of our surroundings. The commonsense view thus seems to have been shown to be internally incoherent. The aim of this article is to persuade the non-sceptical reader that the commonsense view is nevertheless internally coherent, by identifying certain mistakes about the commonsense view that the sceptical arguments embody. The intended audience is only the troubled adherent of commonsense. No attempt is made to persuade the sceptic herself, so there should be no concern about begging the question against the sceptic.

The account of the sceptical arguments will be presented in four parts: First I will argue that the element of explanation is important to the effectiveness of the arguments. Second, that we have (at least) two distinct kinds of justification for our ordinary beliefs: justification by perception and justification by explanatory inference. Third, that if perceptual justification were by inference to an explanation of our sensory experiences, it would be undermined by the sceptical hypotheses, but that our non-explanatory perceptual justification should not be thus undermined.

Finally, we shall see how the sceptic's procedure in presenting the sceptical hypotheses leads us to confuse our actual perceptual justification with a justification by explanatory inference.

Preliminaries: Explanation and the Cartesian Arguments

Some recently popular diagnoses of the sceptical arguments do not assign any role to the offered explanations of experiences. Contextualist writings on scepticism offer clear examples. Consider David Lewis's (1979) first contextualist account of the sceptical arguments. According to Lewis's Rule of Accommodation, in some circumstances, and for some predicates, when confronted with an obviously false assertion, we should adjust the standards of application for the predicate so that the assertion is true by the adjusted standards. Thus if someone denies that a tabletop is flat, we may accommodate her by raising the standards for flatness so that, due to small bumps, it no longer qualifies as flat. However, as Keith DeRose (1995) pointed out, if this is how sceptical arguments work, we should be able to evoke sceptical standards for evaluation of knowledge claims by simply denying knowledge. However, when we say merely, "You don't know that you have hands", it is not as effective as suggesting that you might be the bodiless victim of a demon who causes it to appear to you that you have hands.

It is also said that making a possibility of error salient raises the standards for knowledge (Cohen, 1988; Lewis, 1996). There are various accounts of salience (Lewis, 1996, p. 559; Hawthorne, 2004, pp. 62–5), but on all accounts alternatives are salient when they are brought to our attention in circumstances where we are willing to consider them. But that does not require that the possibilities be presented as explanations.

DeRose (1995, p. 17) suggested that the sceptical hypotheses work because our beliefs that they are false are "insensitive". S's belief that *p* is sensitive if and only if, were it not true, S would not (likely) believe it. I would believe that I am not being deceived by alien super-scientists, even if I were, so that belief is insensitive. Sensitivity is not in general a requirement for knowledge (according to DeRose), but when we *consider* whether someone knows a proposition, it is said, we count the subject as knowing it only if her belief in it is sensitive. But insensitivity does not require an explanation of the subject's experience. Consider the hypothesis that, although it appears to be the case that I am sitting in my office working on this article, I am not. Even if this were true, I would judge that it is false, so my denial of it is insensitive. DeRose (1995, p. 23) suggested that one reason such examples fail to exert much sceptical pull is that they offer no explanation of my experience, but he does not explain why, on his view, this should be a requirement for an effective sceptical hypothesis.

Let's take a closer look at Cartesian explanations of our experience. They do not explain much, nor are they particularly plausible. The hypothesis of alien super-scientists does not explain why I am having these specific sorts of experiences. Why would aliens want me to seem to see books and papers?¹ The commonsense view explains why I am having these experiences – because I am sitting at my computer writing this article, and I left these books and papers strewn about on my desk after consulting them. Apparently for a sceptical argument we only need a semblance of an explanation of our experiences.

On the other hand, really obviously fake explanations of my experiences do not work. Consider the possibility that my neighbour Jeff is causing me to have massively misleading experiences. It is not impossible – since causal relations are contingent – but it does not sound like an explanation, even though it is presented as if it were.

The poor quality of the explanations in sceptical hypotheses indicates that our responses to them, when we are under the influence of the arguments, are probably fairly unsophisticated. But we are not responding merely to an apparently explanatory framing (the Jeff hypothesis), let alone to the mere use of explanation indicator words (“because”). So the psychological mechanism invoked to account for our sceptical inclinations should involve some processing of the alleged explanations beyond immediate understanding of the language. Sceptical effectiveness requires the presentation of apparent explanations, but not sophisticated assessments of those explanations, since the hypotheses do not become (much) more effective when made more detailed or plausible.²

I shall now argue that an account of how the Cartesian sceptical arguments work should focus on the justificational aspect of knowledge. The main reason to think that the arguments seem to undermine justification is implicit in Descartes' procedure in the First Meditation. He plans to set aside all of his beliefs that come “from or through the senses” by considering reasons to doubt them. Those reasons are the Cartesian sceptical arguments. If one doubts, one does not believe (or to the extent that one doubts, one does not fully believe). So reasons to doubt are also reasons to refrain from believing.³ But if one has an unanswered reason to refrain from

1 Compare explanations why the chairs are lined up against the wall. “Someone put them there” does not adequately explain the facts, although it is true and not vacuous. It rules out distribution by hurricane force winds, for example. “Because they cleared the floor for dancing” explains the actual distribution of chairs. Likewise, “a demon is deceiving me” does not explain my experiences, in the absence of much more detail about the demon's motivations.

2 The absence of detail in the Cartesian hypotheses is not due to a lack of scientific understanding of perception. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors presumably had a detailed understanding about when perceptual errors were likely and how to guard against them. None of that unscientific sophistication about the likely causes of perceptual error is evoked in the sceptical hypotheses.

3 I take it that absence of evidence that p is one sort of reason to refrain from believing that p, though not the reason suggested by the Cartesian arguments. Nothing here is intended to suggest otherwise.

believing that *p*, then one ought not to believe that *p*, and so one is not (fully) justified in believing that *p*. Descartes' procedure thus uses the sceptical arguments to show that we are not fully justified in our perceptual beliefs.

Another reason to think justification is the target of these arguments is that they do not suggest that we fail to satisfy other necessary conditions for knowledge. The possibility of the sceptical hypotheses does not indicate that our beliefs about our surroundings are untrue (just that they might be). Nor do they indicate that we lack knowledge because we already in fact fail to believe, although they may have the effect of persuading us not to believe. Nor do they indicate that our justification has that difficult-to-articulate disconnection from the truth that occurs in the Gettier (1963) cases. That seems to leave, as the apparent target of the Cartesian sceptical arguments, only justification.⁴

On the other hand, it is true that one might respond to the sceptic by saying, "Maybe I don't really know, but I am still justified in believing." But this seems reasonable because "justified belief" is ambiguous between merely having (some) reason and being fully or adequately justified. The Cartesian sceptical arguments do not deprive us of all reason to believe, but they do seem to leave us inadequately justified.

How might the sceptical arguments appear to undermine our justification for our perceptual beliefs, so that it no longer seems to be adequate for knowledge? It will be argued below that there are two quite different kinds of justification that the sceptical arguments cause us to confuse. One is perceptual and requires the exercise of properly learned recognitional skills. The other kind of justification depends upon an inference to the best explanation.

This is contrary to a familiar response to the sceptical arguments which holds that perceptual justification just is a species of explanatory justification. Perceptual beliefs are justified as explanations of experience, and the sceptic's hypothesis, as an apparent rival explanation, appears to undermine that justification. Without an independent reason to reject the sceptic's explanation, our beliefs then appear to be inadequately justified. But, it is alleged, the commonsense explanation has theoretical virtues (simplicity, conservatism, explanatory coherence . . .) that the sceptical hypotheses lack, and those virtues are a good enough reason to maintain the commonsense explanation and so to justify the commonsense beliefs in spite of the sceptical alternative.⁵

4 Or whatever comes closest to justification on those views of knowledge that avoid a justification condition. Those who deny that knowledge requires justification, preferring for example a reliabilist, or virtue theoretical, or proper functioning (etc.) account of knowledge, owe us an account of the plausibility of the Cartesian line of thought.

5 Many philosophers have defended and criticized variations of these views. For recent discussion see Vogel (1990) and Feldman and Conee (2004).

As reasons to question whether this response to scepticism is adequate as it stands, and thereby to motivate consideration of my own view, I shall briefly mention two difficulties. One is that it does not explain why sceptical hypotheses that seem obviously deficient as explanations of our experiences still provoke a sceptical reaction. Why, on the view that perceptual justification just is explanatory inferential justification, are we so troubled by such very sketchy rival hypotheses? If, when reviewing the sceptical arguments we are in fact considering, and should be considering, the relative merits of rival explanations, as this view holds, it seems that obvious differences in the quality of the explanations should make a noticeable difference in our sceptical reactions.⁶

The second difficulty, noticed by ancient sceptics as well as by Descartes and Hume, is that the sceptical arguments, however convincing when considered, seem to have little staying power.⁷ It is hard to continue to be a sceptic when not actively considering the arguments. But beliefs based on explanations, even those that seem incompatible with commonsense, are not usually so quickly lost. We have little difficulty continuing to believe that the earth rotates, or that apparently solid objects are composed of tiny particles moving through mostly empty space.

The view I shall present will have something to say in explanation of these facts about our reactions to the sceptical arguments. I take this to be a *prima facie* advantage for my view over the familiar indirect realist view, and a further reason to mention these difficulties here, even though space is lacking for a thorough discussion.

Two Kinds of Justification

Let us consider some evidence that we have two different kinds of justification for our ordinary beliefs. Suppose I see and hear Sarah giving a talk at a conference. I come to hold two beliefs (among many others): First, I believe that Sarah is giving a talk. Second, I believe that her talk was chosen for the programme after submission in the usual way. My belief that Sarah is giving a talk seems to be an ordinary perceptual belief, based as directly as such beliefs ever are on seeing her and hearing her giving a talk. My belief that her talk was chosen after submission in the

⁶ I do not think I am confusing the normative and the factual here. How we react on reflection, where there is no accompanying feeling of impropriety or other self-disapproval, is at least evidence that our so reacting is consistent with our previously unarticulated norms, as the fact that we spontaneously produce, and do not correct, a sentence is evidence that it is consistent with our previously unarticulated norms of grammar and so may indicate what those norms are.

⁷ Explaining the up and down character of our attitudes toward scepticism is an important point in favour of contextualist accounts.

usual way results from an explanatory inference from my belief that she is giving the talk and some background beliefs that I have about how people come to be giving such talks.

The main difference to notice about these two beliefs is that, for the perceptual belief, it is reasonable to raise doubts about recognitional skills and opportunities, but, on the assumption that the perceptual belief and the background beliefs from which it is inferred are previously adequately justified, there is no further occasion to do that for the explanatorily justified belief. In examining my belief that Sarah was giving a talk it would be reasonable to wonder whether I know how to recognize Sarah, and whether I had an adequate opportunity to do so on this occasion. Have I had sufficient previous opportunities to observe Sarah to learn to recognize her? Did I get a good enough look (and hearing) on this occasion? Such questions about recognition do not arise naturally in connection with my inferential belief that Sarah's talk was chosen in the usual way (although they might arise in connection with the beliefs from which it was inferred). Instead a rival explanation might be suggested in order to put it in doubt. It might be suggested, for example, that the programme committee issued her a special invitation, although she had not submitted a paper. To defend the justification of my belief, I would then need to offer evidence against the proposed rival explanation, e.g., testimony against it from a programme committee member. But whether I know how to recognize Sarah will not matter for my inferential justification, although it may for the justification of the beliefs from which the inference was made.

Questions raising doubts about my recognitional skills and opportunities apparently suggest that I did not have the right sort of experience, or that I do not know how to process the experience I did have to appropriately arrive at beliefs about Sarah. They do not suggest alternative explanations of my experience. This is not to deny that alternative explanations of perceptual experiences – illusions, hallucinations, realistic dreams – might also be proposed as grounds for doubting the resulting perceptual beliefs, both in ordinary circumstances and in discussing philosophical scepticism. Such grounds for doubt will be discussed below. For now I merely notice that the possession and proper use of recognitional skills is apparently required for perceptual justification, and that such skills are not always required, directly, for inferential explanatory justification. If it is claimed that S saw (heard, smelled, felt, etc.) that *a* is *F*, and thereby came to be justified in believing that *a* is *F*, it is reasonable to ask whether S knows how to recognize *a* and how to recognize *F*s, and whether S had an opportunity to do so then. If the true answer to either question is "No", then it seems S did not perceive that *a* is *F* and any belief she has that *a* is *F* is not *perceptually* justified for her. It may however be justified for S in other ways – e.g., by testimony or by explanatory inference – that do not require that she herself has recognized that something is *a* and that it has the property of being *F*.

What counts as the right sort of experience for justifying a given perceptual belief has long been a topic of interest to philosophers. But the equally central topics for perceptual justification of (a) having the right sorts of recognitional skills and (b) using them properly on the occasion of the perceptual judgement have, at least until recently, been somewhat neglected.⁸ Let us briefly consider these matters, since the account of the sceptical arguments to be proposed will make non-trivial claims about the role of recognition in perceptual justification.

First a terminological stipulation about “recognize”. The term usually implies success, so that one cannot recognize Sarah unless one is really perceiving her. But it will be convenient to use it without that implication, as we do for example when we talk of recognizing Sarah in a video or in a pencilled caricature. On this stipulation, my brain in a vat counterpart may be truthfully said to recognize Sarah, provided that he is having the same subjectively available perceptual input that I am, and processing it the way I do, when I (really) recognize Sarah.

Recognition is often not explicitly considered in discussions of perceptual justification. Consider Pryor’s account:

The dogmatist about perceptual justification says that when it perceptually seems to you as if p is the case, you have a kind of justification for believing p that does not presuppose or rest on your justification for anything else, which could be cited in an argument ~even an ampliative argument! for p . To have this justification for believing p , you need only have an experience that represents p as being the case. No further awareness or reflection or background beliefs are required. (Pryor, 2000, p. 519)

I agree that we do not need any supporting beliefs for perceptual justification, but the suggestion that we need no further “awareness” seems not to be correct: we do need some awareness of recognitional processes, at least to the extent of monitoring whether we have had “a good look”. Experiences that p are not all equally justifying for a belief that p . I may be seeing that Sam is walking across campus either from twenty feet away in full daylight or from a hundred yards at twilight. Or I may be seeing that Sam is walking across campus for two seconds from a fast-moving car or for a period of minutes as I walk toward him. These are all perceptual experiences whose content is (among other things) that Sam is walking across campus, but some of these experiences may not justify a belief with that content. A perceiver who was unaware of the difference between the good looks and the bad looks, but believed them all equally, would not be justified in her resulting beliefs.

The history of the recognitional abilities makes a difference too, even if it is not reflected in one’s other beliefs. Suppose that I came to have my recognitional inclinations for Sarah by guessing, at some time in the past, that the person I was

⁸ But see Millar (2010).

then seeing was Sarah. I did not realize at the time and have not realized since that I merely guessed who Sarah was, so I have no present or even past beliefs that would undermine the justification of my perceptual beliefs about Sarah. Whenever I see this person now I arrive at perceptual beliefs about Sarah. As it happens they are mostly true beliefs, because I was lucky in my initial guess. But if my guess was never subsequently confirmed, these perceptual beliefs are not justified, even though they are based on experiences as of Sarah, and experiences that would, if my history of acquiring this recognitional tendency were only a little different, fully justify my perceptual beliefs about her.

These examples may seem unfairly chosen, since Pryor's account of *prima facie* perceptual justification is intended to apply only to "perceptually basic" categories, such as colour, shape, distance, and motion, where the content of experience is as it were delivered by "hardwired" perceptual mechanisms. But questions about recognition arise even there. Due to colour blindness, I have never learned to recognize the colour red. It seems that I would not automatically be able to recognize it even if my physiological deficiency were surgically repaired, as may in fact be possible.⁹ After the surgery, but before I opened my eyes and saw something I previously knew to be red and not green, I still would not be able to recognize red. This is true even if the first sight of red would create an ability to recognize it from then on, at least as *that* colour. Furthermore, there will always be a question whether the perceiver did in fact recognize the basic qualities on the occasion in question. So we do not eliminate concerns about recognition by restricting the discussion to perceptually basic qualities.

Even if there were no need to *learn* to recognize simple shapes and colours and distances, because those capacities are hardwired in normal people, we do need to learn to recognize lots of ordinary things by their complex shapes and colours. It may be reasonable to set aside these more complex cases temporarily, in order to focus first on what one takes to be a central matter of philosophical concern, how the transition from an experience that *p* to a belief that *p* can justify the belief. But the initial focus on simple cases must not become a refusal to consider other matters that are also important for the ordinary epistemic evaluation of these beliefs. We do frequently consider whether subjects know how to recognize particular persons, kinds, and perceptible qualities, and whether they got a good, and sufficiently attentive, look or listen (etc.) in order to recognize them. If the subject does not know how to recognize the relevant things or qualities or did not get a good enough look (etc.), she should doubt the resulting beliefs.

So much is just commonsense. Now we turn to more controversial matters about the nature of recognition. I think knowing how to recognize things and qualities, in

9 Recent work on squirrel monkeys suggests this is a real possibility (Mancuso *et al.*, 2009).

common with other sorts of “knowing how” such as knowing how to ride a bicycle, involves a kind of non-propositional knowledge.¹⁰ One point in favour of this view is that we cannot explain how we recognize things, nor even (quite yet) program computers to imitate it successfully.¹¹ That makes it seem unlikely that perceptual recognition is a matter of employing detailed propositional knowledge. These difficulties are obscured by the custom of discussing perceptual justification with reference to very simple cases, such as seeing a ball of one uniform colour, where the visual appearance as of spherical red supports the belief that red is instantiated spherically. The more complicated cases of recognizing human faces, voices, and animal bodies in motion (etc.), are perhaps expected to be a philosophically boring matter of iteration and combination of such basic propositional elements, into argumentatively structured processes that end in our linguistically expressible observational beliefs about people, animals, artefacts, etc. But there seems to be no persuasive reason to think that exercises of our more complex recognitional abilities will take the shape of justifying arguments.¹²

The view that perceptual recognition involves a kind of non-propositional knowledge gives us a stopping place for the regress of justification. Perceptual justification may rest on something that is not a belief, and therefore does not require further epistemic justification, an exercise of our knowing how to recognize things in response to perceptual input.¹³ As a kind of skill, such an ending point is still subject to normative assessment. There is a right way to acquire perceptual beliefs;

10 Stanley and Williamson (2001) suggest that our attributions of knowing how to A are to be understood as attributions of knowing that something is a way of doing A, and so as a kind of propositional knowledge. But, as they also note, we can have a demonstrative grasp of a way of doing something which is not sufficient for knowing how to do it. Listening to Pollini play, I think “That’s a way to play that piece” but I do not thereby know how to play it. Stanley and Williamson say that the person who knows how to A grasps a “practical mode of presentation” of the way to A. Grasping the practical mode of presentation is not itself explained as a kind of propositional knowledge, so knowing how still seems to involve non-propositional knowledge. One might wonder whether this “grasp” is something other than knowledge, in spite of our practice of calling it “knowing how”. But it is at least natural to say that Pollini *knows* something I do not, in virtue of his having this grasp.

11 Not to deny that progress is being made in computer recognition programs. But it has not been easy, which suggests that we do not have much cognitive access to the way we do it.

12 Information processing accounts of perception, beginning with Marr’s (1982) theory of vision, may seem to indicate that it will, but there is a very large unexplained step from the sub-personal processes posited in those views to the personal state of justification. One cannot simply assume that there is an unproblematic justifying transition from processes in the inaccessible subsystems to the beliefs of the whole person.

13 It is not suggested that this goes any distance toward answering the sceptic on his own terms, which again I am not trying to do. But my recent-brain-in-a-vat counterpart would be justified in its belief analogues, however systematically false. This is one reason for stipulating that “recognize”, as used here, does not entail success. We shall see below why the suggestion that one might be a brain in a vat *seems* to undermine justification, even though actually being one would not.

it is not merely a matter of invoking as the causes of our basic beliefs certain non-normative facts about the workings of perceptual systems.¹⁴

Undermining Kinds of Justification

I will now argue that the sceptical hypotheses *would* undermine justification by inference to ordinary physical things as the best explanation of our perceptual experiences, if we had such justification. But they *should not* undermine our actual perceptual justifications for our beliefs about our surroundings. Notice that we are now considering my account, according to which the sceptical arguments lead us to confuse two different kinds of justification. We are not considering the view set aside above, that ordinary perceptual justification just is inference to the best explanation of experiences.

As we have seen, the Cartesian arguments must be intended to undermine our perceptual justification. But the arguments do not indicate that we lack *prima facie* perceptual justification.¹⁵ They do not for example claim that we do not know how to recognize tables or hands. A recently envatted brain would still know what a hand looks like, although it would be prevented from effectively exercising this knowledge in perception.¹⁶ Nor do the sceptical arguments try to show that conditions are poor for observation or that we have used our recognitional skills inadequately. Therefore it seems that the Cartesian sceptical arguments allow that we have a *prima facie* perceptual justification for our beliefs about our surroundings.

So the sceptical arguments must seem to defeat that *prima facie* justification. There are several ways to defeat a *prima facie* adequate justification for belief. (1) One might have independent evidence against the proposition believed. Consider the belief that Sam committed an act of vandalism, which is justified by testimony from a purported eyewitness. However, there are small footprints and no large footprints on the muddy ground at the scene, and Sam has large feet. That is evidence that Sam did not commit the vandalism, and if we know it, it undermines the testimonial justification for the belief that he did. But such a defeater is not used

14 For accounts of perceptual justification that make knowing how to recognize things central, see Pollock (1986, pp. 126–132), Reynolds (1991), Markie (2004, 2006). Some other accounts of perceptual justification that do not make claims about recognition so central may also be compatible with the broad outlines of this answer to scepticism, provided they make a distinction between perceptual and explanatory kinds of justification, e.g., Pryor (2000); Burge (2003).

15 Pryor apparently denies this, but he gives no argument, and he regards his resulting use of “*prima facie* justification” as stipulative, so perhaps this is not a real disagreement (Pryor, 2000, pp. 534–5).

16 The BIV’s situation is like that of the pianist in Stanley and Williamson’s example, who has lost her arms, and so can no longer play the piano, but has not lost her knowledge of how to play (Stanley and Williamson, 2001, p. 416).

in the Cartesian sceptical arguments. The sceptic does not cite independent evidence supporting propositions that are contrary to my beliefs about my surroundings. She merely claims that her hypothesis is possible on the evidence I have.

(2) One might have independent evidence that the sort of justification is unreliable for a class of cases that includes the one in question. Thus eyewitness testimony of unexpected, rapidly occurring, and emotionally distressing events, such as traffic collisions, or public brawls, is known to be unreliable. Eyewitnesses to such events frequently contradict one another and give reports that are incompatible with strong evidence of other sorts. Such evidence of general unreliability does not support propositions contrary to what one witness testifies in a specific case, unlike (1), but it may still undermine justification by such testimony. But the Cartesian sceptic apparently does not employ this sort of defeater either. Cartesian sceptical hypotheses do not give us statistical information, even of the vaguest kind.¹⁷ They are not evidence that our perceptual beliefs are unreliable.¹⁸

There is however a third sort of defeating consideration. (3) One might have reason to think that the alleged sort of justification is not reliable *for the case in question*, without being unreliable more generally, because the same sort of justification also supports a contrary proposition in the given case. Perhaps I hear that Sarah has an identical twin sister, Sally, so that my experience and application of my recognitional abilities equally support both the claim that Sarah is speaking and also the contrary claim that Sally is speaking. Then I will not be justified by perception alone in thinking that Sarah is speaking. This sort of undermining contains elements of both the above defeaters, since in it there is justification for a contrary proposition (that it is Sally who is speaking) and it (thereby) indicates that the sort of justification employed is not reliable in this particular case, though it does not undermine perceptual justification that does not involve recognizing Sarah or Sally.¹⁹

An example of such undermining for an explanatory justification was given above, where it was suggested that, instead of being chosen in the usual way, Sarah might have been invited to speak without a formal submission. Incompatible explanations of the evidence we possess leave us doubting which explanation to

17 The sceptical arguments from actual perceptual conflicts, influential in ancient times, are apparently different in this regard from Descartes' Dream and Demon arguments. Descartes (1641) rejects such arguments, apparently holding that there is a dialectically defensible account of good conditions for observation.

18 If we remembered or were told that we had taken hallucinogens that would be such evidence. See Feldman and Conee (2004, pp. 298–299) for more discussion of sceptical hypotheses as defeaters.

19 It is sometimes suggested that the Cartesian skeptic offers us "a reason to doubt" as if that were something different. For reasons explained above, I think reasons to doubt are ipso facto underminers of justification (as tending to show that we ought not to believe), so when we have reviewed the ways of undermining justification we have also reviewed the reasons to doubt.

accept, even if one purported explanation is somewhat simpler or has other modest theoretical advantages (as does the hypothesis that Sarah's talk was chosen in the usual way).

The sceptic apparently offers us this third sort of undermining consideration, the sort where the same kind of justification supports a contrary proposition, when she suggests that our experiences might be due to a demon or alien super-scientists. This suggestion seems to be compatible with our having the experience we do, so we are left, apparently, with no evidential reason to reject it.²⁰ If our perceptual beliefs were justified as explanatory inferences from our sensory experiences, that justification would thus be somewhat undermined.

The sceptical hypotheses should not however, in this third way, undermine our *recognition* justification for our perceptual beliefs, because the sceptical hypotheses, while they might have some justification as explanations, do not have any *perceptual* justification.²¹ Perceptual justification requires previously learning (or perhaps in the case of basic perceptual qualities just knowing) how to recognize things. But we have not learned to recognize the workings of evil demons or alien super-scientists. "Looks like BIV input arranged by alien super-scientists" is not something we are in a position to judge. Nor have we learned to recognize realistic dreams, though we can recognize waking up and so conclude that "it was only a dream".²² So our *perceptual* justification should not be undermined by the sceptical suggestions.

A particular perceptual justification may be put in doubt by a reason to think that something looks/sounds/feels (etc.) just like the thing we think we are perceiving, as in the case of Sarah and Sally. But bare possibilities of perceptual duplicates, without reason to think they are (at all) likely to be true, do not seem to yield the third sort of undermining. Consider: "These might be non-books that look and feel just like books." The suggestion that Sarah *might* have a double who also gives philosophical talks should not lead me to doubt that it is Sarah I am seeing. But if I hear that she really does have an identical twin sister who is also a philosopher, I will then reasonably doubt that it is Sarah I am seeing.

20 Part of the attraction of "a priori" responses to scepticism such as those offered by Descartes (1641), Davidson (1983, 1984), and the semantic answers of the sort suggested by some of Putnam's work (Putnam, 1981), is that they seem likely to be independent of the details of our actual sensory experiences.

21 That is not to deny that there might be broadly empirical evidence that one is likely to be in such a situation. Consider Bostrom's (2003) suggestion that we now have reason to think our descendants may be able to duplicate our conscious lives in computers and so that our current experiences may be thus re-occurring. But such a consciousness does not *recognize* that it is merely a re-realization of previous conscious representations, even if it entertains that as a possibility.

22 To say that we do not *in fact* know how to recognize demon-caused hallucinations is not of course to imply that we could not *learn* to recognize such hallucinations (e.g., with tutorial assistance from the friendly demon).

I am not of course saying that only justified beliefs can serve as defeaters, nor that only perceptually justified beliefs can serve as defeaters for perceptually justified beliefs. Unjustified beliefs that I actually hold may of course be defeaters for perceptually justified beliefs. But is there, in fact, such an unjustified belief that I hold when I am being influenced by the Cartesian arguments? To undermine my argument for the present account, such an unjustified defeater must be identified as part of a plausible alternative account of our reaction to the Cartesian sceptical arguments.

One might still wonder whether the proposed sceptical explanation of our experiences might in effect thereby justify a contrary proposition, as mentioned in (1) above. A strong explanatory justification for believing in subatomic particles undermines any perceptual justification for the belief that this hand is not mostly empty space. One might wonder whether the sceptical hypotheses could be similarly construed. But in the case of Cartesian scepticism, unlike the case of subatomic particles, the explanatory justification does not really support a proposition contrary to the perceptually justified proposition. So long as I have more than one viable explanation of my experience (and of course I do not have a rival “solid hands” explanation for the evidence that supports the particle physics hypothesis), I have at best an explanatory justification for the disjunction of those explanations. I have at best explanatory justification that I am surrounded by books and papers in my office *or* that I am a BIV stimulated by alien technology or . . . (any other explanations that have not been ruled out). That disjunctive proposition is not in conflict with the proposition that I am sitting in my office surrounded by books and papers, which is indeed one of its disjuncts. So there is no real conflict between my actual perceptual justification for my commonsense beliefs and the explanatory justification offered by the sceptic.

Why We Are Misled

We are now ready for the third part: Why are we taken in by the sceptic? On my view we are very familiar with these two sorts of justification, and with the appropriate challenges to them, and as people who are very familiar with commonsense epistemic norms we ordinarily respond to such challenges correctly. Why isn't it obvious to us that the sceptic's challenge is inappropriate?

I think that the sceptic's procedure temporarily leads us to confuse the two sorts of justification, by treating one kind of justification as if it were the other. She talks *as if* we were dependent on an inference to the best explanation, by offering the sceptical explanatory hypothesis as if it were a rival explanation. Such challenges to explanatory justifications are common. We are in the habit of responding to them by offering evidence against the rival explanation, or pointing out obvious theo-

retical problems (e.g., “That’s awfully complicated”), if we can, or by conceding that our belief is not justified, if we cannot. But now we apparently lack acceptable evidence against the offered alternative explanation, and it is not obviously too complicated, etc.

We do not immediately see that the explanatory challenge is not appropriate, because we are aware that our perceptual beliefs do in fact explain our experiences, (although they are not *justified* in that way). I am having my current visual and tactile experiences *because* there is a desk in front of me with a computer on it and I am typing. My beliefs are justified perceptually, not as an explanation of my experiences. But when offered the sceptic’s proposed explanation, sketchy though it is, I automatically respond as if my beliefs had an explanatory justification, rather than the perceptual justification they really have, because it is my habit to respond that way to offers of rival explanations. Later I will return to the appropriate judgement about perceptual beliefs, which is why the sceptical arguments are not lastingly persuasive.

A few disclaimers: Nothing in the process of making this mistake requires that those who fall into it accept indirect realism about perception, even temporarily. By evoking our habits of belief evaluation, the Cartesian sceptic generates an illusion of lack of justification. She does not use beliefs we have, or almost have, about the structure of perception.

Since the sceptic evokes our habits of belief evaluation, becoming aware of how we are taken in will not necessarily make the sceptical response any less vivid. Our habits of evaluating the various forms of justification are deeply engrained and obviously useful. Since these cognitive habits are not to be given up, we should expect that we will continue to feel some sceptical “pull” even if we accept this account of how the Cartesian arguments work and so come to believe that we should not be influenced by them.²³

This is not a contextualist view. The feeling that we have to propose an independently grounded reason to reject the sceptic’s hypothesis is caused in us by the similarity of the sceptic’s suggestion to legitimate challenges to those of our beliefs that are in fact justified as inferences to the best explanation. But our impression that we must answer it is just a mistake. It is not due to a legitimate adjustment of the standards for knowing. Giving up a contextualist account of the Cartesian arguments will not of course undermine other motivations for contextualism. Contextualism may still be supported by our intuitions about the more ordinary cases of apparent shifts in standards, and perhaps also as an explanation of the lottery paradox and related non-Cartesian sceptical worries (Cohen, 1998).

23 It should also explain why sceptical arguments are not permanently persuasive, and still seem to be persuasive, in spite of the weakness of the sceptical explanations. It is an automatic reaction to the sceptical presentation, and we return to our ordinary, normatively correct, judgements as the influence fades.

That still leaves the question of how we should answer logically valid forms of the Cartesian sceptical argument: If I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat, I do not know that I have hands. I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat. Therefore I do not know that I have hands.²⁴ My suggestion is that this argument is unsound because the second premise is false. I do know that I am not a brain in a vat. It just *seems* that I do not know it when I consider the BIV hypothesis, because that hypothesis seems to undermine my perceptual justification for believing propositions that are incompatible with being a BIV. But as we have seen, the feeling that I need to have an independent reason to reject the BIV hypothesis is due to an illusion about justification. I know I am not a brain in a vat because I know through perception that I have a body and sense organs that are perceiving this hand and this desk (etc.) and I know that those facts are logically incompatible with the story briefly summarized by saying that I am a brain in a vat.²⁵

I need not have independent reason to give the sceptic's hypotheses little probability in order to thus acquire such knowledge, because, contra White (2006), I am not relying on any sort of probabilistic argument. I know by perception that I am typing on this computer, and I know by inference from that that I am not merely being given typing hallucinations by a demon. If there really is a demon then I am wrong, but I still have a non-probabilistic argument from perceptually justified premises to reject the existence of the demon.

That my view denies our sceptical intuitions is a point against it. But it offers an explanation of those intuitions, and it explains much else about our responses to the Cartesian sceptical arguments. It especially has the virtue I have been emphasizing in this article, which contextualist views and some others currently lack: it explains why we need an apparent *explanation* of our sensory experiences to produce scepticism, not merely a possible error that has been rendered salient.

We have habits for evaluating beliefs, which habits are exploited by the Cartesian arguments to lead us astray in our judgements about whether we know. The sceptic tricks us, without realizing that that is what she is doing, into treating our perceptual beliefs as if they had an explanatory justification. She offers a rival explanation of

24 DeRose's (1995) short version of the sceptical argument.

25 A claim also made in Feldman and Conee (2004, pp. 300–301) although they have a different story to tell about why we tend to think we are not entitled to it. In response to Duncan Pritchard's (2005) underdetermination version of the sceptical argument, I am inclined to argue that there is no genuine underdetermination, by the evidence, of the choice between the commonsense view and the sceptical hypothesis. But I think relating my talk of kinds of justification to Pritchard's talk of evidential determination and the subtle notion of "reflective luck" is too large a project to attempt here. Obviously my view exhibits some influence from G. E. Moore's writings on scepticism and commonsense and it has affinities to more recent Moorean views, including those ironically self-described as Dogmatism. I hope to contribute to philosophical theorizing about what commonsense says, and why it should be listened to, rather than merely adding another voice to Moore's insistence that commonsense is to be preferred to the results of philosophical argument where they conflict.

our experiences, of the sort that we are in the habit of treating as an objection to justifications by inference to the best explanation. Habit then carries us to try to give a reason to reject that rival explanation. When we cannot easily find such a reason, habit again tempts us to conclude that we are not in fact justified (at all), and so that we do not have perceptual knowledge. But this is only a recurring illusion. We do still have the knowledge the sceptic's hypothesis only seems to undermine.

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