

# The Groundlessness of Skepticism

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**Abstract:** I offer a three-part cure for skepticism about the external world. First, I show that prominent arguments for this kind of skepticism rely on a single, shared idea. This is the idea that perception can never put us in touch with the world in a way that guarantees the truth of what we perceive. Second, I show that the best available arguments for this idea are question-begging. It follows that, unless a better argument can be given, the idea should be treated as a baseless intuition. Third, I argue that the presentation of an alternative view about what perception can put us in touch with—a view sometimes called ‘epistemic disjunctivism’—completes the cure. Once the external world skeptic is made to see that her skepticism is groundless, she can accept the alternative view on ordinary grounds. Since this view offers a straightforward way of making sense of perceptual knowledge, the skeptic’s acceptance of it cures her.

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Perception puts us in a position to know many things about a world of physical objects. This is a fact. But it is easy to lose our sense that it is true. Arguments for skepticism about the external world, the view that we have no knowledge whatsoever of how things are in the world around us, are plentiful and not easily resisted.<sup>1</sup> These arguments threaten our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

An ambitious or *curative* response to skepticism attempts to change the skeptic’s mind using only premises and inferential steps she would accept. Many philosophers

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<sup>1</sup>I primarily have in mind skepticism in the contemporary sense: a view or theory that we know very little. See, for example, Nozick (1981), 197; Stroud (1984), vii. But I also treat it as a condition which a person can have or be in. This kind comes in many varieties, including: a belief that we know very little; doubt that we can have knowledge of a particular kind; doubt about the truth of a class of propositions; a feeling of perplexity, discomfort or alienation when considering claims to knowledge; awareness of an inability to understand how one can know what one takes oneself to know; a disposition to occupy any of the previous conditions; and so on.

now believe such a response is bound to fail. They opt for a more modest, *preventive* response, which attempts only “to show how to retain...our pretheoretical beliefs about perception...without accepting the premises the skeptic needs for his argument.”<sup>2</sup> Since the preventive response makes no claim to convince the skeptic, it may exploit assumptions that beg the question against him.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, I argue that the modest response is bound to fail: Until we can show a skeptic how she has gone wrong, we cannot resist her arguments in good faith. In what follows here, I show that we need not give up on a more ambitious response. I offer a three-part cure. In §1, I show that prominent arguments for external world skepticism rely on a single, shared presupposition. This is the idea that perception can never put us in touch with the world in a way that guarantees the truth of what we perceive. In §2, I show that the best available arguments for this idea are question-begging. It follows that, unless a better argument can be given, the idea should be treated as a baseless intuition. In §3, I sketch an alternative view about what perception can put us in touch with—a view sometimes called ‘epistemic disjunctivism.’ Since the view offers a straightforward way of making sense of perceptual knowledge, acceptance of it cures skepticism. I argue that once the external world skeptic is made to see that her skepticism is groundless, she can accept this alternative view on ordinary grounds, and so be cured. I then argue, in §4, that my three-part cure is uniquely able to meet several of the most pressing objections waged against antiskeptical strategies which appeal to epistemic disjunctivism. Doing so not only clarifies how my cure’s three parts fit together. It also demonstrate that the cure is more dialectically effective, and able to reach a wider range of skeptics, than other disjunctivist strategies.

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<sup>2</sup>Pryor (2000), 517.

<sup>3</sup>For endorsement of the preventive response to skepticism over the curative one, see Pryor (2000), 517–520; Williamson (2000), 27; Byrne (2004), 300–303; Byrne (2014), 278, 285.

# 1 A common premise in skeptical arguments

Skeptical arguments often invoke so-called ‘skeptical scenarios’. If you are now hallucinating, or dreaming, or being misled by a computer program or an evil demon, everything could appear to you exactly as it would if you were actually perceiving how things are. Things could be radically different than they appear without your being able to tell. There would be, as Descartes said, no “signs” by which you could tell wakeful perception from that which is dreamt or simulated.<sup>4</sup>

I think we must accept, along with the skeptic, that such scenarios are possible.<sup>5</sup> Let us also concede that if we are in such a scenario, we cannot know anything about the world around us through perception. Nor could we know that we are in such a scenario. These concessions to the skeptic do not yet imply that we cannot know anything about the world around us. But they can seem to, with the help of one or more very intuitive premises.<sup>6</sup>

Take, for example, the skeptical argument from the principle that knowledge is closed under entailment. According to that principle, if you know something, and you know that what you know implies something further, then you know that further implication.<sup>7</sup> The argument runs as follows:

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<sup>4</sup>Descartes (1641 (1996)), 13. More carefully: the meditator of Descartes’ first meditation says this, while the meditator of the sixth meditation acknowledges a sort of coherence in waking life which dreams lack.

<sup>5</sup>At least in the metaphysical sense, that nothing about the basic structure of reality precludes their possibly obtaining. It does not follow from this that they must be epistemically possible—that we cannot know them not to obtain. I will later suggest that we can know that they do not obtain, if they do not. For worries about the metaphysical possibility of such scenarios, see Echeverri (2017).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, McGinn (1989), 7: “At no point does [a skeptical] argument require us to accept anything that is either obviously false or even open to doubt.” See, also, Greco (2007), 2: “skeptical arguments are powerful in the following sense: it is not easy to see where they go wrong, and rejecting them requires one to adopt substantive and controversial theses about the nature of knowledge and evidence.” Similar points are made in DeRose (1999), 1–2. For an opposing view, see Byrne (2004).

<sup>7</sup>We can express this formally as follows: If you know  $\phi$ , and you know  $\phi$  entails  $\psi$ , then you know  $\psi$ . There are many variants of this principle. For our purposes, an imprecise formulation will

### Argument from knowledge closure

(A1) If you know that you have hands, and you know your having hands implies that you are not a disembodied brain in a vat, then you know that you are not a disembodied brain in a vat.

(A2) You know your having hands implies that you are not a disembodied brain in a vat.

(A3) You do not know that you are not a disembodied brain in a vat.

So, (A4) You do not know that you have hands.

The premises imply the skeptical result (A4) deductively. We must deny one of the premises, if we are to resist the skeptical result. This may seem tough, if the premises appear plausible. (A1) is an instance of the knowledge closure principle, which gives a plausible explanation of how we can extend or adapt our knowledge base through deductive inference. In this regard, it carries a theoretical load. To deny it would be to deny what seems to be one of the primary ways we learn new things or retract our claims to knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

What about (A3)? Many philosophers view this premise as an intuitive reaction to skeptical scenarios. They typically claim that it can be accepted in virtue of its intuitiveness.<sup>9</sup> But we can ask on what conditions it appears intuitive.

The answer, I think, is that it is only intuitive if one presupposes that perception can never put us in touch with the world in a way which guarantees the truth of what we perceive. Let us call this presupposition *No Guarantee*. Consider what would

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suffice. For discussion, see Williamson (2000), 117; Kvanvig (2006); Hawthorne (2013), 29; Pritchard (2015), 12–14.

<sup>8</sup>Very few philosophers deny even weak versions of knowledge closure. Well-known exceptions include Dretske (1970); Nozick (1981), 204–209.

<sup>9</sup>For example, Pritchard (2015), 163 calls (A3) a “deep-seated intuition.” See also Nozick (1981), 167; Cohen (1988), 91; DeRose (1995), 2, 27, 48.

follow if No Guarantee were false. If you do in fact see, or feel, that you have a hand, then this would put you in touch with the world in a way that guarantees that you have a hand. Such a guarantee would put you in a position to know you have a hand. You could then know that you are not a disembodied brain, by deduction from your perceptual knowledge. The possibility of extending our knowledge in this way is precisely what the principle of knowledge closure describes.

I have not yet denied No Guarantee. At this point, I only ask us to imagine denying it, in order to bring out that the alleged intuitiveness of (A3) rests on accepting it. Could (A3)'s intuitiveness derive from another source? As Keith DeRose notes, it is tempting to explain our inability to know that skeptical scenarios don't obtain by appealing to our inability to rule such scenarios out.<sup>10</sup> But, again, we can ask why we find it plausible that we cannot rule out skeptical scenarios. And, again, acceptance of No Guarantee seems central. After all, if we were to deny No Guarantee, it would be natural to think that some cases of perception allow us to rule out skeptical scenarios, for instance, by deduction from the perceptual knowledge they make available. The same holds for a variety of related claims about our apparently poor epistemic position with regard to skeptical scenarios—for example, that we cannot tell or discern whether they obtain, or distinguish their obtaining from their not obtaining. As DeRose notes, these claims are so closely related to each other that “citing one of these to explain the plausibility of another doesn't occasion even the slightest advance in our understanding.”<sup>11</sup>

Without an independent source of plausibility, we should thus view any skeptical argument which employs a premise like (A3), which denies that we can know whether skeptical scenarios obtain, as tacitly presupposing No Guarantee.<sup>12</sup> This presupposi-

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<sup>10</sup>DeRose (1995), 16.

<sup>11</sup>DeRose (1995), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Some arguments for skepticism that assume a premise like (A3), but do not rely on any closure

tion is controversial, and far from obvious. Any skeptical argument which presupposes it would be incomplete without a defense of that presupposition. In the next section, I will argue that such a defense is hard to come by. But we should first ask if any skeptical argument can avoid presupposing No Guarantee.

The most promising way to avoid this presupposition, it would seem, would be to avoid any premise like (A3)—any premise which alone places skeptical scenarios beyond our ken. After all, (A3) was the premise whose apparent plausibility was found to presuppose No Guarantee. Let us then look at a skeptical argument which makes no assumption of this kind, and ask whether it, too, presupposes No Guarantee. I will focus on the skeptical argument formulated in Pryor (2000). Pryor’s main aim in this article is to give a preventive response to skepticism. But in order to do this, he first formulates the most powerful skeptical argument he can. To do so, he explicitly avoids assuming potentially controversial claims like (A3).<sup>13</sup> For this very reason, Pryor’s skeptical argument appears more forceful than the argument from knowledge closure. But, as I will argue, Pryor’s argument too appears plausible only on the presupposition of No Guarantee.

Pryor’s skeptical argument begins with a disjunction that even those who reject principle, include: Wright (1991); Brueckner (1994); DeRose (1995), 1; Lewis (1996), 539; Wright (2008), 403; Mizrahi (2016), 370–371.

A similar case can be made about skeptical arguments from other epistemic principles. According to the principle of underdetermination, if a given piece of evidence does not support one claim over a second, then we cannot know the first claim on the basis of that evidence alone. With this principle in mind, a skeptic might claim that perception never provides better evidential support for your having hands than for your being a disembodied brain in a vat stimulated to think you have hands. Since things can appear the same in waking perception and certain skeptical scenarios, we can say that appearances are common to both. But why think our evidence must depend on that? The answer, I think, is again prior acceptance of No Guarantee. If perception did put us in touch with the world in a way that guarantees the truth of what we perceive, then in certain cases perception could provide conclusive evidential support. No other evidential support is as good as conclusive evidential support.

<sup>13</sup>He writes: “some philosophers refuse to allow the skeptic to use claims like ‘I can’t know I’m not being deceived’ as *premises* in his reasoning. Maybe skeptical argument can *convince us* that we can’t know we’re not being deceived; but why should we grant such a claim as *a premise* in a skeptical argument?” (Pryor 2000, 522–523, 543n11).

(A3) should find plausible:

(B1) Either you do not know that you are not a brain in a vat – or – if you do know this, you know it on the basis of knowledge gained through perception.

Most people who reject (A3) now do so on the grounds that perception may, at least in some cases, put us in a position to know that skeptical scenarios are false.<sup>14</sup>

If the first disjunct holds, it is relatively clear why skepticism would follow; the argument from knowledge closure is one possible route.<sup>15</sup> To reach a skeptical conclusion from the second disjunct, Pryor’s skeptic “require[s] us to know that we’re not being deceived. . . *antecedently* to knowing anything on the basis of perception.”<sup>16</sup> The demand is for us to establish that we are not in a skeptical scenario in a way that does not depend on the thought that we are now perceiving, and on that basis know, how things are in the world around us. If we cannot do this, the skeptic says, our perceiving things to be a certain way cannot be an adequate basis for our knowing that we are not in a skeptical scenario.<sup>17</sup> We can express this requirement as follows:

(B2) If you know that you have hands on the basis of some perceptual evidence  $E_1$ , then you must be able to know that you are not a brain in a vat on some basis  $E_2$  which differs from and does not presuppose  $E_1$ .

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<sup>14</sup>(B1) is very close to the denial that we can know that we are not in skeptical scenarios *a priori*, a claim many now accept as a lesson learned the hard way. Transcendental arguments like those found in Strawson (1959) argue *a priori* that things in the world must be a certain way if we are to think or experience as we do. But the anti-skeptical merits of these arguments have been questioned. See Stroud (1968 (2000)), 24; Strawson (1985), 22–23; Cassam (1987), 377–378; Grayling (1992), 507–508; Stroud (1994 (2000)), 162–163; Stern (2000), 59–63. Content externalist approaches like that of Putnam (1981), Ch. 1 argue *a priori* from the meaningfulness of thought or language to the falsity or unintelligibility of claims about being in skeptical scenarios. But the prospects of this approach have seemed dim. See Brueckner and Ebbs (2012); Miracchi (2017), 369–371. Some hold that *a priori* generic presumptions of the reliability of perception are rational. See BonJour (1985). But the number is small. Anyone committed to one of these *a priori* strategies may deny (B1). But most philosophers now accept it.

<sup>15</sup>Pryor’s skeptic could alternatively appeal to (B2), discussed below.

<sup>16</sup>See Pryor (2000), 525 for Pryor’s glosses on “antecedent” knowledge and justification.

<sup>17</sup>Pryor (2000), 524.

According to (B2), the evidence given in a perception is an insufficient basis for knowledge of how things are in the world. To be that basis, it must be supplemented with independently based knowledge that we are not in a skeptical scenario. (B1) says that we can have no non-perceptual basis for knowing that we are not in a skeptical scenario. But (B2) guarantees that no piece of perceptual evidence is ever a sufficient basis for this knowledge. It then follows that we cannot know anything about the world on the basis of perception.

Since we reach this conclusion from the assumption of either of (B1)'s disjunct, it has been shown to follow deductively from (B1) and (B2).<sup>18</sup> We can now ask whether, and on what conditions, the premises are plausible.

I will not consider the credentials for (B1) here.<sup>19</sup> Why think that (B2) is true? Pryor argues that it follows from two claims. The first is a general epistemic principle about the relation between knowledge and evidence:

(B $\alpha$ ) If you know  $\phi$  on the basis of evidence  $E_1$ , then for every  $\psi$  for which, if  $\psi$  were true, you would have the same evidence  $E_1$  but  $\phi$  would be false, you must be able to know  $\psi$  is false on the basis of some evidence  $E_2$  which differs from and does not presuppose  $E_1$ .<sup>20</sup>

Put roughly, this is the idea that we must know on independent grounds that a given piece of evidence is not misleading in order to know something on its basis. Here is an intuitive illustration: Say Pearl tells you that Garnet got married. If Pearl is honest and observant, her testimony could, perhaps, still count as evidence for

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<sup>18</sup>Above, I suggested that a knowledge closure principle like (A1) could bridge the gap between the first disjunct of (B1) and the skeptical conclusion. But (B2) would work just as well. Thus, we need not include (A1) within the premises of Pryor's argument. See note 15.

<sup>19</sup>Though see note 14.

<sup>20</sup>(B $\alpha$ ) is a broadening of "SPK" on Pryor (2000), 528 so that the former concerns the relation of knowledge to evidence in general, rather than to specifically *perceptual* evidence. (B $\alpha$ ) thus implies SPK. In formulating (B $\alpha$ ), I spell out Pryor's elliptical notion of relative "badness."

Garnet's having gotten married even if Garnet did not. According to  $(B\alpha)$ , if you are to know that Garnet got married on the basis of Pearl's testimony, you had better be able to know that Pearl is not now mistaken. And it seems you would not be able to know this on the basis of Pearl's testimony. You would need some further evidence.<sup>21</sup> After all, how could you know something on the basis of evidence which could possibly mislead you, without knowing that it is not misleading in this case?

The second claim is an alleged observation about the relevance of skeptical scenarios to the evidence given in perception:

$(B\beta)$  The same evidence is made available to you from your perceiving things as they are – and – from things' appearing to you to be the same in an indistinguishable skeptical scenario.

$(B\beta)$  says that any evidence made available to you through perception is also available to you in certain skeptical scenarios. This idea, together with  $(B\alpha)$ , implies that we can only rule out skeptical scenarios on the basis of evidence which differs from and does not depend on any evidence we are currently getting from perception. That is just what  $(B2)$  says.

Pryor thinks that  $(B\alpha)$  is the source of  $(B2)$ 's skeptical power, and the claim which the skeptic has “work to do... to persuade us of.”<sup>22</sup>  $(B\alpha)$  is the claim he then tries to resist in order to avoid skepticism.<sup>23</sup> Notably, Pryor does not even mention

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<sup>21</sup>And this evidence must not rely on your evidence: Pearl's testimony. If Amethyst told you that Garnet got married, too, but she only thinks this because she was there when Pearl told you, that would not help.

<sup>22</sup>Pryor (2000), 529.

<sup>23</sup>Pryor (2000), 531–532, 537. More precisely, Pryor's primary target is a slightly stronger claim which states an analogous relationship between perceptual justification and evidential support. This claim, “SPJ,” is articulated on p. 531. Ultimately, though, Pryor thinks rejecting this claim suffices for rejecting the slightly weaker claim about knowledge, since the former implies the latter (cf. 521). The latter is my focus.

Pryor makes no attempt to say what work the skeptic might have to do to defend  $(B\alpha)$ . Nor does he try to say why the skeptic might find it plausible. Pryor's lack of interest in the skeptic's

(B $\beta$ ), when considering the merits of the premises in his skeptical argument.<sup>24</sup> The suggestion is that (B $\beta$ ) is highly plausible, even undeniable.

Is it? Again, I think (B $\beta$ ) appears plausible only if one assumes No Guarantee. With a guarantee, perception would give us conclusive evidence. This would undermine the idea that a *bone fide* perception and the mere appearances of an indiscriminable skeptical scenario provide the same perceptual evidence. For no perceptual evidence we have in a (relevant) skeptical scenario could be conclusive. Nothing about how things appear to you in such a scenario could guarantee that things are as they appear.

Moreover, it is only the idea that perception cannot give us conclusive evidence, an implication of No Guarantee, that makes (B $\alpha$ ) look central to skepticism. Recall that (B $\alpha$ ) says the following: In order to know  $\phi$  on the basis of some possibly misleading evidence, we need to know on independent grounds that the evidence is not misleading in this case. When we lack conclusive evidence for  $\phi$ , (B $\alpha$ ) can seem demanding, for there will be scenarios in which we can have that very evidence, though  $\phi$  is false. It may be hard to rule out those scenarios on independent grounds. But when our evidence is conclusive, (B $\alpha$ ) is satisfied trivially, since there can be no such scenarios. Conclusive evidence for  $\phi$  implies  $\phi$ . It cannot mislead. (B $\alpha$ ) then demands nothing.

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motivations reappears in his response to the skeptical argument. He tries to counter that argument by advancing “dogmatist theories of perceptual knowledge and justification.” According to such theories, “when you have an experience as of  $p$ ’s being the case, you have a kind of justification for believing  $p$  that does *not* presuppose or rest on any other evidence or justification you may have” (Pryor 2000, 532). In effect, then, the dogmatist theories deny that the skeptic has any reason to demand that you know that skeptical scenarios are false antecedently to your having all the justification you need in order to know something about the world around you. That is why Pryor thinks the theories have “anti-skeptical punch” (537). What goes missing is a diagnosis of why the skeptic seemed to have a reason for this demand in the first place. If Pryor’s dogmatist theories cannot speak to that, it is hard to see how they can help put skepticism to rest. Pryor’s only defense of his dogmatist theories—that they can be shown to be plausible according to the “standard philosophical methodology [of] sensible philosophical conservatism” (538)—then does not seem to help.

<sup>24</sup>Pryor (2000), 529.

Pryor has thus misdiagnosed the skeptical power of (B2). Its true source is (B $\beta$ ), or rather, No Guarantee, the idea which makes (B $\beta$ ) seem plausible.

## 2 Just an intuition

In each of the arguments I have surveyed, a premise about what knowledge or evidence is available through perception appears plausible only on the assumption of No Guarantee, the idea that perception never puts us in touch with the world in a way that guarantees the truth of what we perceive. We should, I think, treat this assumption as a common, often suppressed premise in skeptical arguments. The persuasiveness of such arguments then depends on the assumption's merits. The assumption makes a sweeping claim about one of our cognitive faculties. It is not obviously true, and we have seen that it leads quickly to skepticism. What can be said in its favor?

Presumably, an argument for No Guarantee would need to start from observations about perception. These observations may make claims about what I will call our epistemic position: our evidence, warrant, or knowledge. Or they may make no such claims. They can instead make claims about the basic character of perception. To reach No Guarantee, these claims would then need to be combined with further claims that bridge these basic characteristics with their alleged epistemic significance.

Let us consider first the route which starts with claims about our epistemic position in perception. To avoid circularity, such claims must not depend for their plausibility on the assumption of No Guarantee—nor on any skeptical premise which depends on No Guarantee for its plausibility. If my arguments in §1 are sound, the resources are fairly meager. But some claims about our epistemic position in perception are not controversial. No one denies that things can, through perception, appear to you one way when they are in fact another. In such cases, everyone agrees, percep-

tion fails to put you in a position to know how things are in the world around you. And in such cases, everyone agrees, it can still seem to you as if you are seeing how things are. You may not, and in some cases cannot, know that you are misperceiving. Skeptical scenarios attest to this fact.

These uncontested observations can seem to imply No Guarantee, as follows:

(C1) When you misperceive, perception does not guarantee the truth of what you (seem to) perceive.

(C2) When you misperceive, you cannot always tell that you are misperceiving.

So, (C3), your epistemic position can be no better when you are correctly perceiving than when you are misperceiving and cannot tell that you are.

So, (C4), perception can never guarantee the truth of what you perceive.<sup>25</sup>

The inference to (C3) can seem good insofar as your inability to know you are misperceiving can seem to level the playing field. It can seem to show that, for all you know, you are misperceiving right now. After all, if you are in fact misperceiving, you could not know that you are. This thought could assail you even if it happens that you are perceiving things as they are. And that seems to imply that you are no better off even when you are not in fact misperceiving. If that is right, it would imply that you always lack a guarantee that you are perceiving things as they truly are. Any seeming guarantee would be just that: a *seeming* guarantee.

But the inference to (C3) is worth questioning. Your not being able to tell you are misperceiving when you are, and your receiving something less than a guarantee in that case, does not logically imply that you cannot have that guarantee when you

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<sup>25</sup>An argument of this shape is sometimes called the “Argument from Illusion.” See discussions in McDowell (1982 (1998)), 385ff; McDowell (1995), 878ff; Reynolds (2000); Pritchard (2008), 294; Mizrahi (2016); French and Walters (2016); McDowell (2018).

*are* perceiving things as they in fact are. This inference may seem justified, if we deny that perception can ever give you a guarantee that you are perceiving things as they are. But that denial is what the alleged bit of reasoning is meant to reach. If we help ourselves to it in order to vindicate the inference, our reasoning becomes circular. But if we do not help ourselves to the denial, it is not clear why we should treat the inference as justified. Merely entertaining the idea that perception can give us genuine guarantees is enough to show that the inference needs further support. But to provide such support would just be to give a different argument for the same conclusion. The original argument cannot hold itself up unaided.

How does the other route to No Guarantee fare? This route exploits premises which state basic characterizations of perception and premises which bridge the characteristics with No Guarantee as their supposed epistemic consequences. Here, it is hard to see why one would accept the conjunction of both premises unless one already tacitly accepts the conclusion they are meant to support. Consider, for example, an argument which begins by characterizing perception as presenting us with mere images. On this conception, when you perceive a tree, you are presented only with an image of a tree. But your being presented with that image never itself implies that there is a tree there. Some further facts about the causes of the image would be needed to establish that. I think a bridge principle which links this ‘mere-image’ conception of perception to No Guarantee as its epistemic consequence would be quite plausible. For it is hard to see how being presented with images whose presentation does not essentially depend on how things actually are in the world could provide you with a guarantee of how things are in the world. But if one accepts this plausible bridge premise, it is hard to see why one should accept the initial characterization of perception as presenting us only with images, unless one accepts No Guarantee. Perhaps one may accept the conception on the grounds that perception must present

us with the same things both when we are perceiving and when we are misperceiving. But, again, if one accepts the bridge premise, it is hard to see why one should think that we become aware of the same things in both cases, unless one already accepts No Guarantee.

Other arguments may invoke a less restricted initial characterization of perception, and rely more heavily on the bridge premise to reach a skeptical conclusion. Say we allow that perception can, at least sometimes, make us aware of features of the world. We may try to reach a skeptical result using a bridge premise that implies that perception fails to give us a guarantee even when it makes us aware of how things are in the world. But what could lead us to grant such a premise? It is hard to see what could, except an argument like (C1)–(C4) above. We have already seen that such reasoning begs the question. And this suggests that the current reasoning, too, begs the question. It, too, assumes what it purports to show.

In all of the above arguments, it is hard to see how one could reach No Guarantee without tacitly assuming it. The best reasoning in its favor is question-begging. The prospects for finding independent support seem dim. And without such support, we should treat No Guarantee as the bald and baseless intuition it is.

### 3 Reaching the skeptic

Timothy Williamson writes that “philosophical treatments of skepticism. . . are better at prevention than at cure. If a refutation of skepticism is supposed to reason one out of the hole, then skepticism is irrefutable.”<sup>26</sup> Pryor agrees that “the ambitious anti-skeptical project cannot succeed.”<sup>27</sup> But if I am right so far, we need not give up on reaching the skeptic. We can reach her, and change her mind, using the considerations

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<sup>26</sup>Williamson (2000), 27.

<sup>27</sup>Pryor (2000), 520.

given above. For the skeptic, no less than we, can be made to see that her arguments rely on tacit acceptance of No Guarantee. And she, no less than we, can be made to see that she has no sound reasoning to support that idea. This can have a sobering effect, though she may as yet see no other way to think about perceptual knowledge. All she needs to be cured is a genuine alternative she can embrace.

Once the skeptic sees that No Guarantee is groundless, there is no barrier to her seriously entertaining its negation. This is the thought that perception can, in some cases, put us in touch with the world in a way that guarantees the truth of what we are perceiving. We may cache this out as follows: In successful cases of perception, one becomes aware of how things are in the world. Any such case provides a guarantee in the sense that the awareness one gains could not possibly be had were the world not the way one is perceiving it to be. One is, as it were, directly in touch with some features of the world, and thus in a position to know some facts about the world in virtue of such awareness.<sup>28</sup>

A vignette can help show that the idea is both intelligible and familiar. You arrive on time to a family reunion. A few familiar faces are there, but as expected, most are running late. Your brother eagerly greets you, and starts a conversation. After ten or so minutes he says, “By the way, have you talked to mom? She wants to ask you something.” “She’s here? How do you know? I haven’t seen her,” you respond. “I can see her right over there,” he answers, pointing. Sure enough, you see her, too.

We can learn a lot from this scene about the ordinary conception of perceptual knowledge and its basis—a conception we employ in everyday life whenever we as-

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<sup>28</sup>This is not to say that whenever perception provides a guarantee one must feel certain of what one is perceiving. One may remain agnostic, doubt or even deny what one correctly perceives, because one has been misled into mistrusting one’s perception or environment (e.g., by having been falsely told that one is on LSD or that a window pane is a TV screen). Even in such cases, though, perception can make one aware of how things are in the world. One may then come to believe, and know, some fact about the world on the basis of this awareness as soon as one jettisons whatever false beliefs are responsible for the doubt.

sert, ascribe, challenge or defend our claims to perceptual knowledge. Your brother demonstrates that he knows your mom is there by appealing to the fact that he sees her. This answers your question about how he knows. And why should it not? The fact that your brother sees that your mother is there implies that she is. His seeing her there makes him aware of a fact, which, given that he sees it, must be so.

The idea that one can, but does not always, become aware through perception of how things are in the world, and that this awareness may be all one needs in order to know that that is how things are, is sometimes called ‘epistemic disjunctivism.’ The idea gets this title, because, according to it, any alleged case of perceiving is either like this or it is not: it is either a perception of things as they really are, which provides an adequate basis for knowledge that things are that way, or it is a misperception, which does not offer such a basis. The disjunction here emphasizes the fact that the bases are not common between perception and misperception. As we saw, emphasizing this difference can help us resist a tempting slide into skepticism.

In presenting this ordinary conception of perception and its relation to knowledge, and showing that it accords with our everyday practices of talking about knowledge, we have provided the skeptic with a plausible replacement for the conception expressed by No Guarantee. The skeptic can then accept that she can acquire knowledge in the ordinary way: by taking in the world through perception. She would then cease to be a skeptic. She would be cured.

It may seem that the skeptic would still dismiss the ordinary conception of perception. For the skeptic previously resisted our ordinary ways of treating perception as putting us in a position to know things about the world around us. Why should he change on this front? The answer, I think, is that he presented his resistance as based on rational considerations—namely, the ones articulated by his skeptical arguments. These considerations have been undermined by the discovery that those arguments

rely on a groundless intuition. Now perhaps the skeptic may dig in his heels and hold fast to his resistance even after it is shown to be groundless. In that case he would have refused the cure. But any skeptic who *sincerely* claims to be an enemy of dogmatism, or friend of reason, will know better. He will be sobered by a cure which reveals that reason is not on his side.

Still, some anxiety may linger. Nothing I have said proves that we have any knowledge of the world around us. If, after all is said and done, we are victims of a skeptical scenario, we do not have knowledge of the world around us after all. Skepticism would then be true. That possibility, which we have not ruled out, would be tragic, I suppose.

But this possibility, as I have argued, in no way threatens the idea that perception can, when the world cooperates, reveal to us how things really are.<sup>29</sup> The way to see whether we have any knowledge of the world around us is to do just that—look and see. If, by seeing a book or a tree before you, you become aware of how things are in the world, you will have your answer. You will come to know something about the world, without needing any additional proof.

Perhaps there really can be such a proof. Nothing I say here shows or even suggests there cannot be. But to expect that we would *need* such a proof in order to know anything about the world around us, or to put skepticism to rest, is just a version of No Guarantee. It is a version of the groundless skeptical intuition that we always

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<sup>29</sup>The fact that some cooperation from the world is required need not rattle our sense that knowledge is the knower's achievement. If Myla runs a marathon, that is her achievement. But certain conditions in the world beyond her control need to obtain for her to achieve this. She could not have run the marathon, had there not been ground for her to push her legs off, and oxygen to fuel her metabolism and muscle movement. But the fact that these conditions had to obtain for her to run a marathon in no way rattles our sense that her running it was *her* achievement. Similarly, the fact that the world's presenting you with an appearance of how things are is a condition on your being able to know that things are as they appear to be should not rattle our sense that your knowing is your achievement. It is in some sense lucky for you that such conditions obtain, when they do, but your knowledge need not thereby be seen as a result of mere luck.

need something more than what perception can give.

## 4 Objections and replies

The parts of the cure I have offered stand in a relation of mutual support. The disjunctivist conception of perception provides a well grounded alternative to the view of perception that skeptics presuppose. At the same time, tracing a range of skeptical arguments to a common and groundless presupposition is crucial for resisting two prominent lines of argument against disjunctivism. Addressing these will help to defend the ‘cure,’ while also clarifying how its parts go together.

According to John McDowell:

it constitutes a response [to skepticism] if we can find a way to insist that we *can* make sense of the idea of direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment. That contradicts the claim that what perceptual experience yields, even in the best possible case, must be something less than having an environmental fact directly available to one. And without that thought, this scepticism loses its supposed basis and falls to the ground.<sup>30</sup>

McDowell’s response has left many unimpressed. One objection concerns its being one-size-fits-all. Why should undermining one claim count as an adequate response to a phenomenon with such very diverse sources? Crispin Wright complains that McDowell “tends to write of skepticism as if it were a ‘frame of mind,’ or a kind of rootless anxiety or preoccupation, when the truth—as manifested in the recent contemporary discussion—is that we have to deal with a number of specific, sharply

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<sup>30</sup>McDowell (2008 (2009)), 228. See also McDowell (1982 (1998)), 393–394; McDowell (1995), 888n19.

formulable paradoxes, differing in detail in significant ways.”<sup>31</sup> It can then seem naïve to expect that a single move—the replacement of just one idea with another—could diagnose or dispense with skepticism about the external world as a whole.

The cure I offered addresses this concern. Although McDowell does not offer an argument to show it, the seeming diversity of arguments for skepticism about the external world is at least largely superficial. Such arguments tend to rely on No Guarantee.<sup>32</sup> When we see that all of the brush grows from the same root, we can uproot the whole weed in one go.

A second kind of discontent with McDowell’s strategy questions the grounds upon which he recommends the disjunctive conception of perception. Many claim that work is left undone until it is shown that the ordinary conception is correct and the skeptical one wrong. David Macarthur thinks McDowell “needs to do more than to show that a non-sceptical way of thinking is *available*. As we have seen, that leaves the sense that scepticism is *also* available as an equally reasonable option.”<sup>33</sup> As Crispin Wright puts it: “The mere depiction of more comforting alternatives is not enough... A draw... [is] all the sceptic needs.” This sort of draw would seem to be the skeptic’s win, insofar as it would call for agnosticism about whether we have knowledge of the external world.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Wright (2008), 395. See also Wright (2002), 341n13 on the treatment of skeptical arguments in McDowell (1994), 112–113: “The reader may be surprised by the crude—almost caricatured—conception of sceptical arguments which McDowell betrays there. In effect, they are treated as merely a sort of unreconstructed obsession with our fallibility.”

<sup>32</sup>McDowell’s official target is the “highest common factor” view of perceptual justification. This is the view that the epistemic position in a genuine case of perceiving can be no better than the epistemic position in an indistinguishable case of misperception. See McDowell (1982 (1998)), 386; McDowell (1994), 113; McDowell (2002), 99; McDowell (2008 (2009)), 231. Given that misperceptions do not give guarantees that things are as they appear, the highest common factor view straightforwardly implies No Guarantee. McDowell does not argue that skepticism in general depends on No Guarantee, though he arguably hints at such a view with his strong emphasis on skeptical arguments for claims that straightforwardly imply No Guarantee. See note 25 above.

<sup>33</sup>Macarthur (2003), 189.

<sup>34</sup>Wright (1985), 444. In contrast, see Byrne (2014), 278: “The sceptic bears the onus of proof—if she can’t supply a reason why we do not in fact have ‘direct perceptual access,’ and if this is the

What would it take for the ordinary conception to triumph? McDowell's critics are rarely explicit about this. But their criticisms suggest that the conception must be defended in a way that the skeptic could be made to accept. Duncan Pritchard, for example, says: "Given the limited argumentative support that McDowell offers in favour of his view, it is fair to charge him with [the] dialectical vice" of "question-begging," of "groundlessly assum[ing], in [his] premises, a claim that [his] dialectic opponent will not accept."<sup>35</sup>

McDowell is, however, wary of letting the skeptic's "tendentious ground rules" govern his discussion.<sup>36</sup> To him, "the dreary history of epistemology" attests to the fact that once we accept the skeptic's premises, "hope is rather faint" for rescuing a commonsense position.<sup>37</sup> For this reason, McDowell's official "response" to skepticism "is not to answer the skeptic's challenges, but to diagnose their seeming urgency" as deriving from a particular source.<sup>38</sup> Since the challenges need not be answered, he thinks: "my move is not well cast as an *answer* to skeptical challenges; it is more like a justification of a refusal to bother with them."<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, some have read this as "an official refusal to take scepticism seriously."<sup>40</sup>

This refusal, suggested by McDowell's remarks, underestimates the potential of

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most plausible way of explaining our perceptual knowledge, then we may fairly take ourselves to have such access." For an intermediate perspective, see Millar (2008), 597, who thinks "we should not underestimate the amount of headway that McDowell makes against certain skeptical arguments," yet still admits that "McDowell from time to time appears to be dismissive of skepticism. He sometimes gives the impression that once we reinstate a commonsense picture on which we are open to the world, directly embracing worldly facts, skepticism ceases to be of interest."

<sup>35</sup>Pritchard (2009), 478. Pritchard continues: "McDowell himself never explicitly offers [sufficient] supporting argument [for the disjunctivist conception], and rests content instead to offer his view in a broadly quietistic manner (as if simply outlining the main contours of the position would suffice for his audience to recognise its truth, and thereby exit the fly-bottle of scepticism). Perhaps there are some philosophical issues that are best approached in this manner, but scepticism is not one of them." See Pritchard (2008), 302 for a related discussion.

<sup>36</sup>McDowell (2008 (2009)), 229.

<sup>37</sup>McDowell (1995), 878.

<sup>38</sup>McDowell (1995), 890.

<sup>39</sup>McDowell (1995), 888n19.

<sup>40</sup>Wright (2002), 341.

a cure. McDowell himself shows some degree of diagnostic ambition. “My idea,” he says, “is that skepticism looks urgent only in the context of a visibly dubious assumption, which imposes a certain shape on the space of epistemological possibilities.”<sup>41</sup> But his critics are right to think this idea needs a systematic defense. I offered one in §§1–2. Even more important is the point both McDowell and his critics miss: With such a defense in place, it is possible to give a compelling answer to the skeptic’s challenge without taking on her ‘tendentious ground rules.’ This is what the presentation of an alternative does, when accompanied by a convincing diagnosis.

I don’t think this is just naïve. Say that you have an upcoming appointment across town, and you learn there is a parade blocking traffic. You won’t be able to drive around the parade in time. And the appointment is too far for walking. So you conclude you cannot get to your appointment in time. You might, perhaps in a fit of exasperation, challenge me with the question, “How can I get to my appointment on time, if all my options will take too long?” If I respond that the subway goes beneath the parade, and a train is coming in five minutes, I have answered your question. But I have answered it, in part, by rejecting the second clause—by explaining that there is an option you have not seen. I may need to say a little about why the subway really is an available option, if my answer is to reach you. But I do not need to accept what you prematurely concluded: that all your options will take too long. The availability of the subway contradicts this.

Similarly, we can understand the skeptic’s challenge as follows: “How can I know anything about the world, if perception can never make me aware of how things are?” It counts as an answer to her question to explain that she has overlooked an available option: accepting that perception alone can make us aware of how things are in the world. Of course, the skeptic has lost her sense that this is a live option. That is why

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<sup>41</sup>McDowell (1995), 888n19.

she formulates her challenge as she does. But this is just where the diagnosis comes in. If the skeptic can be shown that her acceptance of No Guarantee is groundless, and that this groundless acceptance is the only barrier to her seeing another live option, the option can again become live, and she can be convinced to accept it.

In this way, I think we can offer an answer to skeptical challenges. There is no need to be quiet when faced with them. We can talk to the skeptic. Such a conversation may well succeed, if it includes the right parts in the right order. Here, the disjunctivism McDowell emphasizes is the key final part, which both requires and rightly follows the others. Showing the skeptic the groundlessness of his skepticism is essential preparation for the presentation of an alternative he can find compelling.

## 5 Conclusion

I have offered a three-part cure for skepticism: (1) Trace skeptical arguments to a common presupposition, No Guarantee; (2) show that this presupposition is groundless; (3) offer a viable alternative that does not lead to skepticism. This cure is meant to convince a skeptic about the external world to change her mind. It can defuse a variety of skeptical arguments. And although I have focused on external world skepticism, it can in principle be extended to other forms of skepticism. Those skeptical about other minds, or the reliability of memory, or the claims of morality, or meaning in life, can be reached in the same way, whenever their skepticism can be traced to a similarly groundless presupposition, and replaced with a viable non-skeptical alternative.

The three-part strategy, if executed successfully, provides all that is needed to change the relevant skeptic's mind. The first two stages show her that her skepticism is the result of a baseless intuition, and that arguments which seem to imply it topple

without prior acceptance of that intuition. This clears any obstacles to her coming to accept, in the third stage, an alternative to the intuition. The third stage answers her challenge to make sense of a kind of knowledge that she denied we have.

The strategy also has broader implications for the role of skepticism in theorizing about human knowledge. According to many, that role is to be a measure by which to test our theories and principles. If an epistemic theory or principle can be shown to lead to skepticism, it is thereby shown to need refinement.<sup>42</sup> While this picture is not wrong, it is apt to mislead. Or, to put the point another way, the ‘measure’ provided by skepticism could easily be abused. When principles such as knowledge closure are made to lead to skepticism, it would be a mistake to fault the principles, and on that ground suggest all sorts of apparent refinements to them. The refinements would not help to avoid skepticism, so long as No Guarantee is held in place. All this would do is leave us with less plausible principles, now neutered or chimerical. The kind of ‘measure’ skepticism is, first and foremost, is a dowsing rod for finding No Guarantee, or an analogue, at the root of one’s theory.

Relatedly, if I am right, one need not conclude from the emergence of skepticism that one is working with too demanding a notion of knowledge. If the skeptic demands that our knowledge be based on a guarantee, he is not asking too much. Instead of lowering the standards for knowledge, we can show that perception can rise to them. We can do this by showing that the barriers to seeing that it can are groundless.

I want to close with a brief reflection on some implications that go beyond theoretical pursuits altogether.

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<sup>42</sup>See Miracchi (2017), 364: “Skeptical challenges can show us where our epistemological theories have gone wrong. If we find that our theorizing motivates premises that compellingly lead to skeptical conclusions, we must have gone wrong somewhere in our theorizing. The anti-skeptical task for the epistemologist is to figure out what went wrong—how her theorizing about knowledge and justification could motivate such problematic conclusions.” See also Gupta (2019), 28: “The skeptic... provides us with a useful touchstone: a model of experience and rationality that allows skeptical arguments to go through is for that very reason a flawed model.”

According to McDowell, we become skeptics as a result of faulty philosophy. It is “a familiar epistemologists’ syndrome”<sup>43</sup> which causes us to lose sight of a conception of perceptual knowledge which “ought to seem sheer common sense, and it would if questionable philosophy did not put it at risk.”<sup>44</sup> McDowell’s anti-skeptical project is “to rescue the position from bad philosophy, and to leave it looking perfectly satisfactory.”<sup>45</sup> This gives the impression that the project exhausts itself in correcting a theoretical error.

Faulty philosophy is indeed the main cause of the seemingly rational support structure which helps hold skepticism in place. But philosophy need not be, and I think rarely is, the original source of skepticism itself. Skepticism regularly occurs to people who have no training in philosophy or rhetoric and little inclination to speculate, including even children. Everyone “gets” *The Matrix*. Indeed, the source of skepticism need not lie in any kind of reasoning. Since No Guarantee enters our minds as a groundless intuition—as is strongly suggested by the fact that its best available defenses are question-begging—it may be more plausible to locate its source in feeling.

Skepticism can in turn leave troubling feelings in its wake. It can make the world, and other people in it, feel unreal. It can alienate us from our environment, and each other, and make things seem to matter less than they do. If I am right, such feelings are often the original sources of our skepticism. But they can also be its consequences, when skepticism combines with, magnifies, and seems to justify preexisting isolation, anxiety, apathy, egocentrism or sociopathy. In this way, the value of the cure I offer here is not limited to correcting a mistake in philosophical theorizing about knowledge.

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<sup>43</sup>McDowell (1995), 878.

<sup>44</sup>McDowell (2002), 98.

<sup>45</sup>McDowell (2002), 98.

It does not just promise to “cause a sea of philosophy to subside.”<sup>46</sup> It contributes to a defense of human cooperation, commerce, psychology and morality.<sup>47</sup> The simple idea that we can really be in touch with the world is a powerful one. Removing the barriers between us and that idea, and so between us and the world, helps us reclaim a sense of belonging to a world we share with others.

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<sup>46</sup>McDowell (1982 (1998)), 389.

<sup>47</sup>For a classic treatment of altruism as based in a conception of oneself as one person among others who are equally “real,” see Nagel (1978).

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Philosophical skepticism, then, differs from ordinary skepticism at least regarding the field of propositions to which it is claimed to apply. But even within the realm of philosophical skepticism we can make an interesting distinction by appealing to the scope of the thesis. 2. Two Basic Forms of Philosophical Skepticism. One interesting distinction between kinds of philosophical skepticism pertains to the question whether they iterate. Following the same ancient tradition, we will call that kind of skepticism "Pyrrhonian Skepticism". Without any claim to historical accuracy, we will take Pyrrhonian Skepticism to be absolute skepticism—the thesis that suspension of judgment is the only justified attitude with respect to any proposition p. Is Pyrrhonian Skepticism so understood self-refuting? Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing. In this Book. Additional Information. Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing. Duncan Pritchard. 2015. Epistemic Angst offers a completely new solution to the ancient philosophical problem of radical skepticism—the challenge of explaining how it is possible to have knowledge of a world external to us. Duncan Pritchard argues that the key to resolving this puzzle is to realize that it is composed of two logically distinct problems, each requiring its own solution. He then puts forward solutions to both problems. Skepticism, the attitude of doubting knowledge claims set forth in various areas. Philosophical skeptics have doubted the possibility of any knowledge not derived directly from experience, and they have developed arguments to undermine the contentions of dogmatic philosophers, scientists, and theologians. Senses and applications. Skepticism developed with regard to various disciplines in which people claimed to have knowledge. It was questioned, for example, whether one could gain any certain knowledge in metaphysics (the philosophical study of the basic nature, structure, or elements of reality) or in the sciences. Duncan Pritchard has written an ambitious and thought-provoking book, which aims to integrate elements of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and of John McDowell's disjunctivism to provide a solution to the problem of external world skepticism. Indeed, it is a significant contribution to the rising trend of "hinge epistemology".[1] A trend that, as the label suggests, aims to develop a Wittgenstein-inspired epistemology. Pritchard's dialectical setup will be familiar to connoisseurs of hinge epistemology. For he contends that scepticism should be understood as a paradox, which, starting with prima facie acceptable premises, leads to the unacceptable conclusion that we do not possess knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions about mid-size physical objects in our surroundings.