

Draft. Please cite published version.

ON THE ALLEGED INSTABILITY OF EXTERNALIST ANTI-SKEPTICISM

Matthew Jope

The University of Edinburgh

jopematt@gmail.com

Standard radical skeptical arguments proceed on the basis that where it is impossible to subjectively distinguish between competing hypotheses, we are unwarranted in believing either hypothesis. I believe in accordance with how things seem to me that I am sat at my desk, but might I not in fact be a disembodied brain floating in a vat of nutrients being electrochemically stimulated into having the illusory experience of being sat at my desk? The skeptic claims that since we are unable to discriminate between such ‘good case’ and ‘bad case’ scenarios, there is no warrant to believe that we are in the good case. An obvious reply to the skeptic is to challenge the assumption that we are warranted in believing that scenario A obtains over scenario B only if we can subjectively discriminate between A and B. This assumption smacks of internalism and thus the avoidance of radical skepticism by rejecting it presents one of the principal advantages of embracing externalist epistemology. This approach has been challenged by Crispin Wright who argues that if we pursue the implications of a thoroughgoing epistemic externalism, we find that the resulting view is “unstable” or “incoherent.”¹ This point “has not generally been grasped with any clarity” we are told.² And thus, if sound, Wright’s argument would present a novel and potentially decisive argument against externalism, distinct from more familiar complaints that externalist anti-skepticism is merely philosophically unsatisfying.³

In a series of papers spanning several decades, Wright has dealt with various forms of skeptical paradoxes.⁴ In his article ‘Internal-External: Doxastic Norms and the

¹ Crispin Wright “Internal-External: ‘Doxastic Norms and the Defusing of Skeptical Paradox,’ The Journal of Philosophy, CV, 9 (2008): 501-517, pp. 513-514.

² Wright “Internal-External: ‘Doxastic Norms and the Defusing of Skeptical Paradox,’ The Journal of Philosophy, CV, 9 (2008): 501-517, p. 513.

³ For a discussion of the standard criticisms of externalist responses to skepticism see Michael Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 213-218.

⁴ Crispin Wright, “Facts and Certainty,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXXI, (1985): 429-472, “Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon,” *Mind*, c, 1 (1991): 87-116, “(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle: G. E. Moore and John McDowell,” *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research*, LXV, 2, (2002): 330-348, “On Epistemic Entitlement: Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free?), *Aristotelian Supplementary Volume*, LXXVIII, 1, (2004): 167-212, “Internal-External: ‘Doxastic Norms and the Defusing

Diffusion of Skeptical Paradox” he presents a simple version of the closure based skeptical argument, a key premise of which is that, for any radical skeptical hypothesis SH , there is no warrant to believe that $\sim SH$. Letting W stand for ‘warrant to believe’, the skeptical premise is:

$$(1) \sim W \sim SH$$

If the motivation for (1) is simply the thought that $\sim SH$ and SH are subjectively indiscriminable, then progress can be made by rejecting this subjective indiscriminability requirement on warrant in favour of an externalist alternative on which (1) comes out as false or unwarranted. The challenge to the externalist is thus to articulate the details of such an alternative. Ultimately, Wright thinks this challenge cannot be met. He briefly sketches how the externalist might try to reject (1), rehearsing safety and reliability readings of W on which (1) turns out to be unwarranted, but despite some initial plausibility he thinks the resulting view is unstable.⁵ I will show that Wright’s argument fails to deliver this result because in rehearsing the externalist view it slips in certain internalist assumptions about evidence and it is precisely these hidden assumptions that generate the instability, rather than anything inherent to externalism itself.

i. The Case for Externalist Anti-Skepticism

Consider how an externalist might try to meet the challenge by rejecting the subjective indistinguishability requirement on warrant in favour of a more externalist-friendly conception of when there can be warrant to believe a proposition. One strategy would be to appeal to an epistemic modal condition such as safety, which says that a belief is safe so long as it is true in the actual world and all or most nearby possible worlds too.⁶ By definition, the denials of radical skeptical scenarios are highly modally robust and thus turn out to be excellent candidates for safe beliefs, provided they are true. This

of Skeptical Paradox,’ *The Journal of Philosophy*, CV, 9(2008): 501-517, “On Epistemic Entitlement (II): Welfare State Epistemology,” in D. Dodd and E. Zardini, eds., *Scepticism and Perceptual Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 213-247.

⁵ Wright “Internal-External: ‘Doxastic Norms and the Defusing of Skeptical Paradox,’ *The Journal of Philosophy*, CV, 9 (2008): 501-517, pp. 513-514.

⁶ This formulation of safety is overly simplistic and will be prone to well-known counterexamples. However, I stick to it for the reason that it is the formulation that Wright uses and that the differences between it and various refined formulations ought not matter for present purposes.

means that on a safety construal of warrant, if we are in the good case ($\sim SH$) then there can be warrant to believe that we are, that is *if $\sim SH$ then $W\sim SH$* . Crucially, whether there can be warrant to believe $\sim SH$ now has nothing to do with our capacity to subjectively discriminate between $\sim SH$ and SH . Whether there can be warrant to believe that $\sim SH$ now has everything to do with whether $\sim SH$.

Wright asks us to consider the “intuitive operator” *it is not to be ruled out that...*⁷ Nothing else is said about this operator beyond its intuitiveness, but since this is a rehearsal of an externalist view, we are presumably meant to interpret it in externalist-friendly terms (more on this below). We may presume, Wright says, that it is not to be ruled out that $\sim SH$. This claim ought to be unobjectionable—even the skeptic should allow that *it is an epistemic possibility* that we are in the good case. Moreover, given that *if $\sim SH$ then $W\sim SH$* , we are now in a position to conclude that *it is not to be ruled out that it can be safely believed that $\sim SH$* . In other words:

(2) *it is not to be ruled out that $W\sim SH$* ⁸

And this, Wright thinks, is exactly what the anti-skeptic needs in order to reject the skeptical premise (1). After all, one way we can read (2) is as *it is not to be ruled out that $\sim(1)$* . Having concluded (2) we have shown that the skeptic is in no position to affirm (1). Thus, by rejecting the subjective discriminability requirement on W in favour of an externalist safety requirement we have easily shown that there is no way for the skeptic to motivate a key premise in their argument, namely (1). Hooray for externalism.

ii. Wright’s Instability Argument Against Externalism

While the above picture seems like a prima facie plausible route to meeting the challenge, Wright claims that it is ultimately unstable. To appreciate why, Wright asks us to reflect that in order to take ourselves to be in a position to affirm (2), we must also take ourselves to be in a position to affirm

(3) $\sim WSH$ ⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

⁸ Wright uses the label (*) for what I am calling (2).

⁹ Wright uses the label (**) for what I am calling (3).

the claim that there is no warrant *for* the skeptical hypothesis.¹⁰ A commitment to (2) is a commitment to (3) because WSH entails $\sim W\sim SH$. In other words, the externalist must deny that one who believes that SH does so safely because if we do safely believe that SH then we do not safely believe that $\sim SH$, which would thus vindicate the original skeptical premise (1).

The problem that Wright wants us to appreciate is that (3) ought to be just as objectionable to the externalist as the original skeptical premise (1): “the externalist is committed to regarding [3], externally construed, as just as inappropriate, and for the very same reasons, as the skeptical premise that we cannot warrantably suppose that SH does not obtain.”¹¹ Wright thinks that the externalist has no better assurance that there cannot be warrant for SH than the skeptic did that there cannot be warrant for $\sim SH$. This is because the safety-based rationale for rejecting (1) allegedly works equally well as a rationale for rejecting (3): the externalist should allow that “we may [...] warrantably suppose that SH does obtain—if, for example, the belief that it does is, alas, safe: is true in all nearby worlds.”¹² The resulting picture thus looks to be unstable and leads Wright to conclude that “externalism actually provides *no* coherent motive for” (2) “and thus no coherent motive for repudiating the original skeptical premise (1).”

Wright does not explicitly rehearse the corresponding rationale for the rejection of (3), beyond these brief remarks, but it is easy to construct by adapting the rationale he gives for rejecting (1). Recall the starting point of the argument for rejecting (1), namely the appeal to the innocuous claim *it is not to be ruled out that $\sim SH$* . The parallel argument for rejecting (3) will thus begin with the corresponding claim that *it is not to be ruled out that SH* . And again, if SH is true then it could not easily have been false and thus could be safely believed. In other words, *if SH then WSH* . Finally, putting this all together, we can conclude that

(4) *it is not to be ruled out that WSH*

which is as bad for (3) as (2) is for (1). Effectively, (4) can be read as saying *it cannot be ruled out that $\sim(3)$* . Though this is not Wright’s way of making the point, the problem is

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 513-514.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 514.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 514.

that the externalist is, in a sense, committed to a kind of Moorean absurdity: *3 but it cannot be ruled out that ~3*.

The argument for (4) is perfectly analogous to the argument Wright rehearses on behalf of the externalist for (2). Each step is the same as before, the only difference being the two different starting points: while the first began by assuming that we cannot rule out that we are in the good case, the second begins by assuming that we cannot rule out that we are in the bad case. Aside from these different starting points, the moves in both arguments are identical. Thus, insofar as the externalist appeals to the safety-based argument for (2) they are (allegedly) obliged to grant the reasoning in the parallel argument for (4). And yet, (4) is as much of a skeptical premise as (1). In fact, in precisely the same way that (2) entails (3), so does (4) entail (1), which means the externalist argument for rejecting (1) ultimately leads round in a circle, forcing us to concede the very premise we set out to reject. Ergo, the whole externalist picture is incoherent. Or so Wright's reasoning would have us believe. In fact, there is a critical mistake in all of this. Contrary to Wright's presentation of externalism, there is in fact no rationale for (4) which the externalist need accept.

iii. Where the Instability Argument Goes Wrong

Wright's introduction of the *not to be ruled out that* operator has some questions hovering over it, one of which is the issue of what it would take to rule something out. This issue could be framed in externalist, internalist, or in neutral terms. Though it is worth repeating, if this operator is to be understood internalistically, then Wright's argument would turn out to fail. After all, the argument purports to show that when we "pursue the implications of a thoroughgoing externalist construal of the relevant epistemic operator sufficiently far" the resulting externalist view is unstable.¹³ Hence, in pursuing such implications it is crucial that all epistemic operators appealed to work in ways that the externalist will accept; crucial that at no point in the argument are we falling back on an internalist conception of warrant or an internalist conception of what it would take to rule something out.

A lot now hinges on what, precisely, is meant by this *not to be ruled out that* operator. Here's a plausible first pass: what allows us to rule something out is our evidence. If *P*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

is not to be ruled out, then P is compatible with a given body of evidence. Likewise, if P is to be ruled out, then P is not compatible with a given body of evidence. So, the *not to be ruled out that* operator is satisfied in cases where there is no evidence against the proposition in question. Another way to put this is in terms of epistemic possibility. Where Wright says *it is not to be ruled out that p* , we may plausibly take him to mean *it is epistemically possible that p* . And again, propositions that are not epistemically possible are those propositions that are ruled out by our evidence.

Evidence is thus a key notion that is implicit in the instability argument at the point at which the ‘not to be ruled out that’ operator is introduced. We have already noted that it is crucial to the soundness of the instability argument that this operator is being understood in an externalist-friendly manner. The pertinent question is then whether the notion of evidence in play is acceptable to the externalist or whether it depends on presupposing some internalist notion of evidence. In both internalist and externalist traditions, various competing conceptions of evidence are possible. One key difference between the two is that internalist accounts of evidence will predict that subjects in subjectively symmetrical pairs of cases will not differ in terms of their evidence, regardless of how else they differ. So, in ‘good’ and ‘bad’ skeptical scenarios subjects share the same evidence. Most externalists, on the other hand, will predict that subjects in ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cases do not have the same evidence.

In what follows it will be useful to have a particular externalist account of evidence in mind. The argument that follows will work on a variety of different externalist accounts that hold that evidence is factive, but it will be helpful to be more specific than this in order to try to run the instability argument against it. One account that has enjoyed increasing popularity in recent years equates evidence with knowledge. On such an account, P is part of one’s evidence if and only if one knows that P . Call this the *E=K thesis*.¹⁴ In line with the discussion of the *not to be ruled out that* operator above, on this account, what it takes to rule out P is knowledge of something that entails $\sim P$. It follows that on such an account, if one is in the $\sim SH$ scenario, then one’s evidence set contains a plethora of ordinary, empirical propositions such as *there are chairs*, *there are tables*, and so on. Conversely, in the SH scenario, one’s evidence is woefully impoverished; one’s evidence set does not contain propositions such as *there are chairs*, *there are tables*.

Recall the first steps of each of the arguments for rejecting, respectively, (1) and (3):

¹⁴ For a statement of *E=K* see Ch. 9. of Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

- (a) it is not to be ruled out that $\sim SH$
- (b) it is not to be ruled out that SH

For the instability argument to go through, it is necessary that both arguments are acceptable to the externalist, and thus that each of these first premises, (a) and (b), are acceptable. It is not to be ruled out that the skeptical hypothesis is false and it is not to be ruled out that the skeptical hypothesis is true. The intuition has to be that our evidence does not allow us to rule in either direction. This intuition is suspect. It depends on an internalist conception of evidence, according to which our evidence is the same across *good* and *bad* pairs of cases. While (a) is true on both internalist and externalist accounts of evidence, (b) is false on any factive conception of evidence because our evidence entails $\sim SH$ and thus it *is* to be ruled out that SH .

First demonstrate that (a) is true. Recall that what would allow us to rule out that $\sim SH$ would be evidence for its negation—that is to say knowledge of something that entails SH . It is easily shown that $\sim SH$ is not to be ruled out by showing that in both *good* and *bad* cases, there is no evidence for (knowledge of) SH .

Argument for (a)

- (i) $SH \rightarrow \sim K(SH)$ (by stipulation of the skeptical case)
- (ii) $\sim SH \rightarrow \sim K(SH)$ (trivial by factivity of *knowledge*)
- (iii) $\Box(SH \vee \sim SH)$ (*law of excluded middle*)
- $\therefore \sim K(SH)$ (i, ii, iii)

In the bad case (SH), one does not know that SH .¹⁵ In the good case ($\sim SH$), it is trivial that one does know that SH (because knowledge is factive). Either SH is true or $\sim SH$ is true (by law the excluded middle). Either way, one does not know that SH , has no evidence for SH , and since we are understanding Wright’s *not to be ruled out that* operator in terms of evidence, it is therefore not to be ruled out that $\sim SH$.

¹⁵ The orthodox view in epistemology assumes that if one is in the skeptical case, then one cannot know this. If I am a brain-in-a-vat, then I cannot know that I am, even were I to believe it. For one rather radical and recent challenge to this orthodoxy, see Ofra Magidor, “How Both You and the Brain in a Vat Can Know Whether or Not You Are Envatted,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, XCII, 1 (2018): 151-181. For a reply to Magidor see Aidan McGlynn, “‘This Is the Bad Case’: What Brains in Vats Can Know,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, XCII, 1 (2018): 183-205.

Now to demonstrate that (b) is false on the externalist account. If it is not to be ruled out that SH , then there is no evidence for $\sim SH$. While in the ‘bad case’ this is trivially true, in the ‘good case’ this is false.

Argument for (b)

- (i*) $\sim SH \rightarrow \sim K\sim SH$ (??)
(ii*) $SH \rightarrow \sim K\sim SH$ (trivial by factivity of *knowledge*)
(iii*) $\Box(SH \vee \sim SH)$ (*law of excluded middle*)
 $\therefore \sim K\sim SH$ (i*, ii*, iii*)

This argument is structurally identical to (a) and is therefore valid, however it fails to support its conclusion because premise (i*) is false. The externalist does not need to grant that in the good case one cannot have evidence that one is in the good case. In the good case ($\sim SH$) one enjoys a plethora of perceptual evidence that supports $\sim SH$. That evidence is just one’s total body of evidence—one’s knowledge—virtually all of which entails $\sim SH$. For example, my knowledge of the existence of objects in my immediate visual field such as chairs and tables entails that $\sim SH$.

Because this argument fails, the first premise of the safety argument for the rejection of (3) is false. Thus, the argument is unsound. The upshot of this is that the instability argument fails to demonstrate that pursuing externalism to its logical conclusion leads to incoherence. That argument depended on there being parity between a safety argument for (2) and a safety argument for (4). There is no such parity because, while the starting point of the former argument (a) is uncontroversial, the equivalent starting point of the latter argument—(b)—is false on an externalist conception of evidence.¹⁶

Would there be parity between the two arguments on an internalist account of evidence? This is an open question and will differ depending on the particular internalist account one favours. All internalist accounts are committed to the thought that, whatever evidence subjects have for their beliefs, it is the same across *good* and *bad* skeptical cases. Whether this evidence allows subjects to rule out SH or not depends on what a specific internalist account says about our evidence. However, one thing is clear: in motivating the instability argument, Wright takes it to be intuitively plausible that we

¹⁶ While the focus here has been on a knowledge-first conception of evidence, this point will extend to other externalist accounts of evidence as well. Importantly, any account according to which evidence is factive could produce the same result.

cannot rule out *SH*, and this intuition does depend on an internalist construal of evidence. A construal, according to which, our evidence does not allow us to rule out *SH* since we would have the same evidence even if *SH* were true. If that is the intuition behind the supposedly plausible (b) that I have identified as necessary in generating the instability argument, then it is clear that the instability that Wright claims to highlight in the externalist position comes not as a result of anything specific to externalism, but rather from an underlying internalist assumption about evidence.