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SCEPTICAL INVARIANTISM
AND THE
SOURCE OF SCEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT. I argue against sceptical invariantism on the grounds that, in common with a number of contemporary proposals in this regard, it misdiagnoses the source of radical scepticism. The nub of the matter is that the problem of radical scepticism does not essentially trade on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard for knowledge as sceptical invariantism supposes; indeed, the putative radical sceptical paradox is no less troubling if we stipulate that the operative epistemic standard for knowledge is very undemanding. As I explain, the idea that the source of radical scepticism concerns epistemic standards in this way pervades the recent treatment of this problem, and hence understanding where sceptical invariantism goes awry casts light on the wider contemporary debate about radical scepticism.

0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Isn't it obvious that the problem of radical scepticism essentially trades on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard for knowledge? As we will see, this is certainly a conception of radical scepticism that drives *sceptical invariantism*, the status of which is our primary concern here. I will be arguing that this way of thinking about radical scepticism is fundamentally mistaken. In particular, I will be claiming that the sceptical problem, in its most compelling form anyway, doesn't trade on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard for knowledge at all. Indeed the problem it identifies, if genuine, would apply at even the lowest of epistemic standards for knowledge. It would thus follow that sceptical invariantism should be rejected because it fails to understand the true source of the sceptical problem.

This conclusion has wider relevance, which is particularly important given that sceptical

invariantism is such a niche view in the literature (which is unsurprising, given that it is itself a broadly sceptical proposal). In particular, I will show how a range of anti-sceptical proposals also effectively treat the problem of radical scepticism as essentially trading on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard for knowledge. It follows that understanding why this is the wrong way to think about radical scepticism has implications not only for sceptical invariantism, but also for the wider debate about radical scepticism.

In §1, I describe sceptical invariantism. In §2, I explain how sceptical invariantism presupposes a conception of radical scepticism such that it essentially involves an appeal to an austere epistemic standard. In the process, I describe two anti-sceptical proposals that are naturally associated with sceptical invariantism (low-standards invariantism and contextualism), and show that they share this background picture of what is driving the problem of radical scepticism. In §3, I say more about the nature of the radical sceptical challenge; in particular, the idea that it poses a putative paradox, and how this is relevant to understanding sceptical invariantism. In §4, I argue that radical scepticism, properly understood, does not essentially appeal to an austere epistemic standard for knowledge. In §5, I further argue that this point also undermines the explanatory story that sceptical invariantism tells regarding the practical purpose served by our everyday practices of making (false) knowledge ascriptions. Finally, in §6, I offer some concluding remarks; in particular, regarding where the true source of scepticism lies.

1. SKEPTICAL INVARIANTISM

According to sceptical invariantism, ‘knows’ has an invariant meaning across contexts of assessment, such that the truth of a knowledge ascription does not change as one switches between such contexts. This is the *invariantist* element of the view. Where the position departs from standard invariantist accounts of ‘knows’, however—and here we come to the *sceptical* element of the view—is in the claim that the epistemic standards for knowledge ascriptions are so high that they can hardly ever, if ever, be truthfully asserted. We thus get the idea that ‘knows’ picks out an invariant epistemic standard that is rarely, if ever, satisfied, such that knowledge ascriptions are rarely, if ever, truthfully asserted.¹

Consider, for example, the canonical version of sceptical invariantism found in the work of Peter Unger (1971; 1975).² Unger argues that some of our most familiar terms, like ‘empty’ or ‘flat’, are *absolute terms*, in the sense that they pick out an absolute standard. Nothing is ever really flat, since that would mean that it had no imperfections on its surface at all, and yet there no such thing in nature as a frictionless plane. Similarly, nothing is ever really empty. A fridge might be

empty of food, or shelves, but it always contains something, such as air (as there is no such thing in nature as a vacuum). Unger maintains that ‘knows’ functions in a similar way. More precisely, he holds that knowledge requires certainty and ‘certain’ is an absolute term, which means that ‘knows’ derivatively picks out an absolute epistemic standard. In particular, to know is to be certain, which in turn is to be absolutely certain, such that one, quite rightly, holds that there is no possibility of error with regard to the target belief. But since it is never appropriate to be absolutely certain about anything, as that would demand infallibility (which, some potential rare cases aside, we never possess), so nothing is ever really known.

I doubt that it will be as straightforward to this audience, as it seemingly was to Unger, that knowledge demands certainty, which rather creates a lacuna in his argument. Nonetheless, what is important to sceptical invariantism is that ‘knows’ invariantly picks out an absolute standard, such that it demands infallible access to the truth. Arguing that knowledge entails certainty, and that ‘certainty’ is an absolute term, is one route to that conclusion. But for our purposes we can simply take it that ‘knows’ is an absolute term directly—or at least that it behaves sufficiently like one—and so side-step the contentious issue of the relationship between knowledge and certainty. What is important is rather that ‘knows’, being an absolute term, demands infallibility, a demand that is rarely, if ever, satisfied.

According to sceptical invariantism, assertions of knowledge ascriptions always express falsehoods. This is what it shares with radical scepticism as it is usually understood.³ The difference, however, is that sceptical invariantism doesn’t leave the matter there, but rather goes on to explain how such a use of ‘knows’ might cohere with our everyday practices. This is the sense in which sceptical invariantism is offering a kind of solution to the sceptical puzzle, albeit a sceptical one. After all, there is clearly a coherent practice of employing terms like ‘empty’ and ‘flat’ in everyday life even on the supposition that they are absolute terms that never actually apply to anything. Accordingly, if ‘knows’ is held to behave in relevantly similar ways, then we ought to be able to similarly make sense of our quotidian practices of knowledge ascriptions, even on the supposition that they systematically express falsehoods.

So, for example, one could maintain when we say that ‘the fridge is empty’ or that ‘the table is flat’, we are implicitly setting aside the absolute standard—we mean only that the fridge is empty of (say) food, or that the table is flat enough for practical purposes. In this way one can account for how the everyday assertions using these terms, while strictly speaking false, are nonetheless appropriate in the conversational contexts in which they are uttered, in that they serve a practical purpose that is cut free from the truth of what is asserted. Proponents of sceptical invariantism, like Unger, can make a parallel claim about our everyday assertions of knowledge ascriptions. While they are also strictly speaking false, they can nonetheless be conversationally

appropriate, but only because, as with our everyday usage of other absolute terms like ‘flat and ‘empty’, we are implicitly setting aside the applicable absolute standard.⁴ (Whether this proposal is entirely plausible is an issue that we will return to).

Sceptical invariantism is naturally thought of as part of a trio of views about radical scepticism, where the other two nodes in the trio are also solutions to the sceptical puzzle, albeit of an anti-sceptical nature. Sceptical invariantism is a high-standards version of invariantism, and so the immediate contrast is with a *low-standards invariantism*. According to this proposal, ‘knows’ picks out an invariant epistemic standard, but it is one that is low enough that we are able to satisfy it. Hence, *contra* the radical sceptic, we have much of the knowledge that we standardly attribute to ourselves. We will consider what such a proposal might look like in a moment. But one key feature of it is that, as with sceptical invariantism, low-standards invariantism maintains that appropriate reflection on our ordinary epistemic practices supports this view, by highlighting how the epistemic standards for knowledge ascriptions are much lower than that employed by the radical sceptic (and low enough to be comfortably satisfied).

We can complete our trio of views by considering a third proposal which maintains that ‘knows’ is not invariant at all, but is rather employed in a context-sensitive way such that it picks out both a high epistemic standard and a low epistemic standard in different epistemic contexts. This is attributor contextualism—henceforth just *contextualism*—here explicitly understood as a response to radical scepticism.⁵ According to this view the sceptical problem can be resolved by recognizing that the epistemic standards for knowledge ascriptions are not invariant but rather variant. In particular, they are sensitive to the epistemic standards of the context of the attributor. In everyday attributor contexts where the epistemic standards demanded are relatively low, then such knowledge ascriptions will express truths, *contra* the radical sceptic. In contrast, in the demanding contexts where scepticism is under consideration, the epistemic standards will be high, and hence the very same knowledge ascriptions will express falsehoods. There is thus a sense in which the radical sceptic speaks truly when she denies that we have knowledge, but this is only a truth that can be expressed relative to her context of attribution. Contextualism thus claims that ‘knows’ picks out a variant epistemic standard across contexts, one that can sometimes be low enough to ensure that knowledge ascriptions express truths, while sceptical invariantism claims that ‘knows’ picks out an invariant epistemic standard across contexts, one that is so demanding that knowledge ascriptions never express truths.

There are, of course, lots of details regarding how these three proposals might be unpacked. But I want to focus on what is common to all three proposals, which is the way in which they each treat radical scepticism as being essentially concerned with our putative inability to satisfy an austere epistemic standard. Sceptical invariantism endorses this aspect of scepticism,

and so claims that our ascriptions of knowledge express falsehoods. In contrast, while agreeing that radical scepticism is concerned with the question of whether we can satisfy an austere epistemic standard for knowledge, low-standards invariantism and contextualism both resist radical scepticism by disputing that we need to be able to satisfy this standard. In particular, low-standards invariantism maintains that although we can't satisfy the austere epistemic standard demanded by the radical sceptic, we can nonetheless satisfy a lower epistemic standard, and that it is the latter which is relevant for knowledge ascriptions. Contextualism takes a more nuanced line and concedes that the radical sceptic is right that our knowledge ascriptions express falsehoods in sceptical contexts of evaluation. Nonetheless, it maintains that in everyday contexts of evaluation, such knowledge ascriptions express truths. On all three views, then, it is accepted that radical scepticism essentially concerns our inability to satisfy an austere epistemic standard, such that avoiding the sceptical conclusion that our knowledge ascriptions express falsehoods entails showing that we are not subject to these austere epistemic standards (at least in everyday contexts of evaluation). It is this claim that I will be contesting.⁶

2. RADICAL SCEPTICISM AND EPISTEMIC STANDARDS

I noted above that it can seem obvious that radical scepticism essentially trades on the idea that we are unable to satisfy an austere epistemic standard for knowledge. Doesn't Descartes motivate the radical scepticism he ultimately rejects by appealing to certainty? More generally, doesn't it seem right to suppose that our ordinary epistemic practices, and hence the epistemic standards that are embedded within them, are much less demanding than the epistemic practices that the radical sceptic is urging upon us?

The case of Descartes is instructive in this regard. For although the appeal to certainty is no longer foremost in contemporary presentations of radical scepticism, these presentations do follow Descartes in appealing to radical sceptical hypotheses (albeit of a less metaphysically extravagant kind—so brains-in-vats rather than evil demons).⁷ These are error-possibilities which call one's beliefs into question *en masse* but which are also by their nature such that we cannot, it seems, know that they don't obtain, since they are indistinguishable from normal veridical experience. But we never consider such error-possibilities in our everyday lives when we attribute knowledge to ourselves and others. Instead, we only consider rather more prosaic error-possibilities, usually of a kind where it is clear what it would take to exclude them. Doesn't that suggest that there is something about the sceptical appeal to these scenarios that indicates a raising of epistemic standards, such that a more demanding range of error-possibilities is being required

for knowledge by the radical sceptic than would be required in an everyday context of epistemic evaluation?

To take a familiar example, what does it normally take to know that what one is looking at is a goldfinch? One can imagine a range of error-possibilities that might be thought relevant here, such as that the creature in question is a different kind of bird that one would ordinarily find in one's garden. This is reflected in what we would standardly take to be a suitable response to the question of how one knows that it is a goldfinch—e.g., that this creature has certain markings (which are distinctive of goldfinches, compared with other birds that might be in the vicinity). Ordinarily, then, to know that what one is looking at is a goldfinch would only demand that one can rule out a very restricted range of error-possibilities. In particular, it would not normally demand that one can rule-out the kind of seemingly outlandish error-possibilities that the radical sceptic offers, such as that what one is looking at is not a hologram of a goldfinch. Here is how J. L. Austin famously put the point:

“Enough is enough: it doesn't mean everything. Enough means enough to show that (within reason, and for presents intents and purposes) it 'can't' be anything else, there is no room for an alternative, competing, description of it. It does *not* mean, e.g., enough to show it isn't a *stuffed* goldfinch.” (Austin 1946, 156)

So expressed, the idea that radical scepticism functions by raising the epistemic standards can look irresistible. Our ordinary epistemic practices only require that for knowledge we should be able to exclude local possibilities of error. The radical sceptic, in contrast, demands that we should be able to exclude radical sceptical hypotheses. Doesn't this mean that the radical sceptical challenge works by raising the epistemic standard for knowledge well above our everyday epistemic standard by dramatically extending the scope of error-possibilities that one must exclude in order to know?

We can recast our trio of sceptical proposals explicitly in terms of this point about radical sceptical hypotheses. According to sceptical invariantism, 'knows' picks out an austere epistemic standard that demands that one is able to know the falsity of radical sceptical hypotheses. On this view, knowledge demands infallibility, and if we cannot exclude these error-possibilities then there is still the possibility that our beliefs are false. Accordingly, since we cannot know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses, it follows that our knowledge ascriptions express falsehoods. Interestingly, sceptical invariantism, while agreeing that the epistemic standard for 'knows' is austere, rejects the narrative we just offered that this is a more demanding epistemic standard than that required by our ordinary epistemic practices. We will return to this point.

Low-standards invariantism, in contrast, argues that our everyday epistemic practices in fact reveal that 'knows' picks out a low epistemic standard that we can satisfy. In particular, as we saw Austin arguing a moment ago, our everyday conception of knowledge only demands that one

is able to exclude mundane possibilities of error, and not radical sceptical hypotheses, which is why our knowledge ascriptions ordinarily express truths. We thus seemingly have a basis on which to resist the radical sceptical challenge by insisting on the adequacy of our everyday epistemic practices and the non-austere epistemic standard for knowledge that they involve.

Contextualism occupies an intermediate position between these two proposals. In sceptical contexts of evaluation, ‘knows’ picks out an austere epistemic standard whereby one needs to be able to exclude radical sceptical hypotheses, which is why knowledge ascriptions express falsehoods relative to this context. In everyday contexts of evaluation, however, ‘knows’ picks out a low epistemic standard whereby one doesn’t need to be able to exclude radical sceptical hypotheses, but only mundane error-possibilities (which one can normally exclude), and hence knowledge ascriptions express truths relative to this context. Contextualism can thus capture a sense in which radical scepticism expresses a truth, in that there is a context of epistemic evaluation where the austere epistemic standard that it insists upon applies. But radical scepticism is nonetheless stripped of its teeth, since relative to normal contexts of epistemic evaluation a much lower epistemic standard applies, one that we can satisfy.

Framing the problem of radical scepticism in terms of the putative need to eliminate radical sceptical hypotheses thus provides us with a way of understanding how this problem trades on demanding an austere, and unsatisfiable, epistemic standard. In particular, we can now make sense of how our trio of views each embody this way of thinking about radical scepticism in terms of how they respond to the sceptical challenge.

3. THE RADICAL SCEPTICAL PARADOX

With the foregoing in mind, let’s examine the problem of radical scepticism a little more closely. In its strongest form, radical scepticism purports to be a *paradox*, where this means that it is supposed to be identifying deep tensions within our own epistemological concepts. This means that we can formulate the problem in terms of claims that we would naturally endorse when taken in isolation, but which can be shown to be collectively inconsistent. In contrast to radical scepticism *qua* position, where the radical sceptic is committed to denying that we possess the everyday knowledge that we ascribe to ourselves, radical scepticism *qua* paradox doesn’t take any stance at all about which of the claims in the inconsistent set should go.

We can bring this point into sharper relief by distinguishing between the radical sceptical paradox, as sceptical invariantism conceives of it, and the particular proposal regarding how we should respond to that alleged paradox that sceptical invariantism offers. In terms of the former,

the paradox essentially consists of the following two incompatible claims:

The Infallibilism-Based Radical Sceptical Paradox

- (I-I) Knowledge demands an absolute epistemic standard that we cannot satisfy.
- (I-II) One has widespread everyday knowledge.

Our ordinary epistemic practices seem to license (I-II), and yet sceptical invariantism maintains that those same practices, properly understood, also license (I-I). So both claims look pre-theoretically compelling when taken individually, and yet they clearly cannot both be true. We thus have a putative paradox on our hands.

Sceptical invariantism as a position offers a sceptical solution to this paradox. This is to argue that we should embrace (I-I) and thereby reject (I-II). What makes this a solution to the paradox, rather than the mere endorsement of radical scepticism as a position, is that it offers us an explanation of how (I-II) could be false. Indeed, this is an account not only of why it is false, but also of why we were mistaken in thinking that this claim is rooted in our everyday epistemic practices in the first place. We only believe that (I-II) is true because we are misled by our systematic practices of making knowledge ascriptions into thinking that we must be committed to the widespread truth of these ascriptions, but the sceptical invariantist has a story to tell about what is driving these knowledge ascriptions that has nothing to do with their truth.

Sceptical invariantism is thus offering us an *undercutting* response to the putative radical sceptical paradox, albeit of a sceptical rather than an anti-sceptical kind. Undercutting responses to alleged paradoxes aim to show that the paradox is illusory (as opposed to *overriding* responses, which grant that the paradox is genuine, but maintain nonetheless that at least one of the claims that makes up the paradox should be rejected).⁸ In the radical sceptical case, this will involve arguing that it doesn't arise out of our own epistemological concepts at all, but rather appeals to contentious theoretical claims that we should reject. In the case of sceptical invariantism, the claim is that we have the wrong theoretical account of our practice of making knowledge ascriptions, one that is not supported by a closer reflection on what those practices actually involve. This undercutting element of the proposal is crucial to its plausibility, given the overwhelming implausibility of denying (I-II); without it the proposal is stripped of much of what makes it interesting.

I want to flag one aspect of this approach that I think is particularly interesting. It has previously been noted in the debate about radical scepticism that it is not enough to resist such scepticism that one can show that our actual epistemic practices seem to license a claim like (I-II), such that one can straightforwardly respond to the puzzle by denying whichever claims in the puzzle conflict with (I-II), in this case (I-I). Consider the remarks that we saw Austin making above, whereby he argues that our everyday epistemic practices treat knowledge as a fallible

notion, the possession of which is compatible with the knowing individual being unable to eliminate certain error-possibilities, including radical sceptical hypotheses. Austin clearly thinks that observations of this kind have a decisive anti-sceptical import for the debate about radical scepticism, such that his case for (I-II) should suffice to give us grounds to reject a claim like (I-I) and hence adopt a low-standards invariantism. But others are not so sure, and this is because it is entirely compatible with radical scepticism being a genuine paradox that Austin's descriptions of our actual epistemic practices are accurate.

The reason for this is that radical scepticism can be rooted in our actual epistemic practices even if it is not immediately manifest in them. In particular, it is natural to think that what the sceptic is doing is taking our ordinary epistemic practices and applying them in a purified fashion, one that is not tainted, as are our everyday epistemic practices, by practical limitations of time, imagination, thoroughness, and so on. Accordingly, one could argue that Austin is right that our actual epistemic practices reveal a fallibilist conception of knowledge and yet that nonetheless there is a genuine radical sceptical paradox to be contended with. The thought is that when we employ our everyday epistemic practices in a thoroughgoing way, unaffected by supposedly irrelevant practical constraints, then we are also led to treating knowledge along infallibilist lines, or at least as demanding that in order to know one should be able to rule-out radical sceptical hypotheses that one is aware of. Hence it is far too quick to suppose that because our everyday practices firmly support a claim like (I-II) that they don't also provide support for (I-I) as well.⁹

The line taken by sceptical invariantism in this regard is much more radical. For what it is claiming is not that the sceptical epistemic practices of treating knowledge as infallible are purified versions of our everyday epistemic practices that are merely implicit in our actual practices. Instead, it is arguing that this is directly manifested in our everyday epistemic practices. That is, properly understood, there is no everyday epistemic practice of widespread knowledge ascription that needs to be explained away, or which can be in tension with sceptical claims, as our ordinary knowledge ascriptions are simply false. The point of this practice, according to sceptical invariantism, is not to convey truths at all, but rather serves a practical purpose that is divorced from the truth of the assertions in play.¹⁰ The supposed support for (I-II) from our everyday epistemic practices is thus illusory.

Sceptical invariantism is thus distinctive both in terms of the conception of the putative radical sceptical paradox that it is engaging with, and in terms of the particular way that it responds to this paradox. On the former front, it treats the putative paradox as arising out of a tension between a supposed everyday commitment to widespread knowledge in conjunction with the fact that knowledge demands an unsatisfiable, infallible, epistemic basis. An appeal to austere epistemic standards is thus at the heart of the sceptical challenge. On the latter front, sceptical invariantism

takes the radical line of claiming that our everyday epistemic practices, properly understood, do not imply any commitment to our possessing widespread knowledge. The paradox is thus undercut, albeit in a fashion whereby it is the sceptical horn of the dilemma, as opposed to the anti-sceptical horn, that is embraced.

4. MOTIVATING RADICAL SCEPTICISM

Notice that the formulation of the radical sceptical paradox just offered to capture sceptical invariantism doesn't make any essential appeal to radical sceptical hypotheses. Given that we already have the idea that knowledge needs to satisfy an absolute, and thus infallible, epistemic standard in play, there is really no need. For while it is true that an infallible conception of knowledge would demand the elimination of radical sceptical error-possibilities—since it would demand the elimination of *all* error-possibilities—one doesn't need to appeal to this particular subset of error-possibilities in order to motivate the thought that we are unable to satisfy an absolute epistemic standard for knowledge. Interestingly, however, contemporary formulations of radical scepticism *do* appeal to radical sceptical hypotheses. I think it is important to understand why.

The contemporary treatment of radical scepticism understands it as essentially a clash between, on the one hand, the idea that knowledge possession is widespread, and, on the other hand, our inability to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. In particular, there is no appeal to an infallibilist conception of knowledge in play in the claim that we are unable to know the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses. It's not that we can't know these propositions because we fail to meet an austere infallibilist epistemic standard, but rather that we do not meet *any* epistemic standard at all, even a low one, as we simply have no rational basis for excluding them, given that they are, *ex hypothesi*, indistinguishable from ordinary veridical experience. This has an important consequence, which is that one needs to bring in a further thesis, supposedly rooted like the others in our ordinary epistemic practices, in order to explain why these two claims are in tension with one another. In particular, independently of an infallibilist conception of knowledge, why can't it be the case that one knows many of the things that one takes oneself to know—about goldfinches and such like—even while being unable to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses?

In the contemporary literature this theoretical lacuna is filled by appealing to the following 'closure' principle which maintains that knowledge is closed under competent deduction:

The Closure Principle

If S knows that p , and S competently deduces from p that q , thereby forming a belief that q on this basis while retaining her knowledge that p , then S knows that q .

One can see the appeal of the principle. Competent deduction is a paradigm form of reasoning. Accordingly, if the input to that competent deduction is knowledge, and the output is a belief based on that competent deduction, then how can one fail to know the proposition that one believes on this basis? The principle thus looks entirely innocuous, and certainly in keeping with our ordinary epistemic practices.¹¹

With this principle in play one can straightforwardly explain why one cannot consistently endorse the idea that knowledge is widespread even though one is unable to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. This is because most of what one takes oneself to know is obviously inconsistent with some radical sceptical hypothesis or other. Accordingly, if one's everyday knowledge is *bona fide* then one must have a way of coming to know, via closure, the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. Conversely, given that one is independently aware that knowledge of the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses is impossible, it follows that one must lack the everyday knowledge that one typically ascribes to oneself and others. Indeed, this becomes very clear once one reflects on what it would mean to arrive at knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses by simply deducing this from the everyday 'knowledge' that one thinks one has. One's rational basis for believing that, for example, one is presently sitting at home in one's living room doesn't seem to be any rational basis at all for believing that one is not presently a brain-in-a-vat artificially stimulated to believe that one is sitting at home in one's living room.

We thus get the following formulation of the putative paradox posed by closure-based radical scepticism:

The Closure-Based Radical Sceptical Paradox

- (C-I) One is unable to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses.
- (C-II) The closure principle.
- (C-III) One has widespread everyday knowledge.

Each of these claims seems independently plausible and rooted in our everyday epistemic practices. And yet they appear to be an inconsistent triad. We thus have a plausible rendering of a paradox. Notice, however, that there is no mention of the idea that knowledge demands infallibility here. All that matters is that knowledge requires the exclusion of the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. Moreover, and in contrast to sceptical invariantism, this demand is not arising out of the nature of knowledge itself, but rather from our everyday concept of knowledge coupled with the closure principle.

We now have two formulations of the radical sceptical paradox, one that is cast in terms of knowledge requiring infallibility, and a second in terms of radical sceptical hypotheses and the

closure principle. Despite the simplicity of the former formulation, I think it is relatively clear that the latter formulation is the more compelling. For there is now no need to appeal to an infallible conception of knowledge, much less to the idea that that such a conception is rooted in our everyday epistemic practices. Instead by appealing to closure one needs only an ordinary fallibilist conception of knowledge to extract the necessary sceptical tension, at least once radical sceptical hypotheses are in play.

There is a further feature of the closure-based formulation of the radical sceptical paradox that is particularly important for our purposes. This is that it highlights why the radical sceptical problem isn't really about epistemic standards at all. In particular, one can lower the epistemic standards as much as one likes, and it seems that the puzzle will still be with us.

In order to see this, remember why it is that we cannot use closure to come to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses on the basis of a competent deduction from our putative everyday knowledge. The reason is that one's rational basis for the everyday claim doesn't seem to have any bearing at all on the radical sceptical scenario; indeed, it only seems to be a rational basis for that claim because one is already disregarding the possibility that one is radically in error. That's why the fact that it seems to one as if one is presently sitting in one's living room is no rational basis at all for excluding the radical sceptical hypothesis that one is a brain-in-a-vat.

With this point in mind, it should be clear that lowering the epistemic standards doesn't make the problem posed by closure-based radical scepticism any more tractable. According to either low-standards invariantism or contextualism, one ought to count as having knowledge (i.e., the relevant knowledge ascriptions will express truths) relative to everyday contexts of epistemic evaluation. For that to be the case, however, one's belief needs to meet at least some significant epistemic standard. But what would that be, given the closure-based sceptical argument? For notice that the sceptic isn't arguing that one's failure to exclude radical sceptical hypotheses means that while one's belief fails to meet the standards for knowledge it nonetheless enjoys some lesser epistemic pedigree. The point is rather that it has no epistemic pedigree at all. It's not that one has some reason to think that one is presently seated in one's living room, and hence some reason to think that one is not a deceived brain-in-a-vat, but that the reason in either case doesn't suffice for knowledge. Rather, since one has no reason for excluding the brain-in-a-vat scenario, so one has no reason at all for thinking that one is presently seated in one's living room. Lower the epistemic standards as much as one likes, one still lacks knowledge, which just goes to show that the issue is not really about epistemic standards at all.¹²

We can further bring out the point that radical scepticism does not essentially trade on an appeal to austere epistemic standards for knowledge by considering a further formulation of the paradox that is widely held to be broadly equivalent to the closure-based formulation.¹³ This

version of the radical sceptical paradox employs not the closure principle but rather this underdetermination principle:

The Underdetermination Principle

If S knows that p and q describe incompatible scenarios, and yet S lacks a rational basis that favors p over q , then S lacks knowledge that p .

This principle seems compelling. What would it mean for one to know that one's car is parked in the garage if one knows that this entails that it isn't parked on the drive, and one has no rational basis that favours the first scenario over the second? Note, in particular, that the underdetermination principle is in fact very undemanding. One needs to have a better reason for thinking that one's car is in the garage rather than on the drive, but it needn't be decisive. So, for example, that your son told you earlier that it was in the garage should suffice, *ceteris paribus*, even if his testimony about these matters is not especially reliable. The crux is that if one really takes oneself to have no more reason for thinking that the car is in the garage than for thinking that it is parked on the drive, then one doesn't know that it is in the garage. What could be more uncontroversial?

The problem emerges, however, once we bring in radical sceptical hypotheses. After all, it seems that we have no rational basis that favours our everyday beliefs over radical sceptical scenarios, even though we recognize the general incompatibility between the two. I don't have a rational basis that favours my belief that I'm sitting in my living room over the known to be incompatible sceptical scenario that I'm a brain-in-a-vat. We can thus employ the underdetermination principle to problematize our everyday knowledge. Here is the formulation of the paradox that we end up with:

Underdetermination-Based Radical Scepticism

(U-I) One cannot have rational support that favors one's belief in an everyday proposition over an incompatible radical skeptical hypothesis.

(U-II) The underdetermination principle.

(U-III) One has widespread everyday knowledge.

As before, we have, it seems, an inconsistent triad, where each of these claims appears to arise out of our everyday epistemic practices.

As with closure-based radical scepticism, the question of epistemic standards doesn't seem to arise here at all. There is no appeal to an infallibilist thesis about knowledge, for example. Moreover, just like earlier, it's also true that lowering the epistemic standards won't by itself offer a way out of this puzzle. The sceptical contention, after all, is not that one has some rational support for one's everyday beliefs, but that it doesn't rise to the level of knowledge. The claim is rather that one has no good reason at all for one's everyday beliefs. Think about the reasons that one can

offer for thinking that one is presently sitting in one's living room. If they don't favour this scenario over the known to be incompatible brain-in-a-vat scenario, then in what sense does one have any reason at all for this belief? Accordingly, lowering the epistemic standard for knowledge doesn't make the underdetermination-based sceptical problem any more tractable, and that's because this problem doesn't essentially trade on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard for knowledge in the first place.

This point becomes especially obvious when we consider the most dramatic way of responding to underdetermination-based scepticism, as presented by *epistemological disjunctivism*. According to this proposal, we should reject (U-I) on the grounds that the rational support our perceptual beliefs enjoy in paradigm cases is factive, in that it entails the target proposition. It follows that (U-I) must be rejected, since in such cases one not only has a rational basis for one's belief that favours it over radical sceptical alternatives, but one which actually entails that the latter are false.¹⁴

Crucially, however, epistemological disjunctivism is allied to a fallibilist conception of knowledge. Just as knowledge can be both fallible (i.e., acquired via a process that could have resulted in a false belief) and factive, so the rational support that one's belief enjoys can be both fallible and factive. The point is that one doesn't need to argue that knowledge can satisfy an infallibilist epistemic standard in order to block underdetermination-based radical scepticism. Indeed, although epistemological disjunctivism opts for factive rational support in response to this problem, one could in fact motivate the rejection of (U-I) with something much weaker, since all that is really required is favouring epistemic support. We are thus reminded that what is lacking, according to the radical sceptic, is not epistemic support that satisfies an austere epistemic standard, but rather epistemic support of a most minimal kind.

5. SCEPTICAL INVARIANTISM UNRAVELS

This brings me to my final point about sceptical invariantism, which concerns the story it tells about our everyday knowledge ascriptions. Recall that although these express falsehoods, they are also meant to serve a practical purpose, just as (on this view) ascriptions of emptiness and flatness can serve a practical purpose even while being false. As we noted above, the plausibility of this story is vital to the undercutting credentials of the proposal as a response to the radical sceptical paradox.

Thus far we have accepted this story at face value, but it is now time to examine it more closely. In particular, notice that the explanation of why our everyday ascriptions of emptiness and

flatness can be practically useful while strictly speaking expressing falsehoods is that they approximate to the absolute standard. So while nothing on this view is really empty, we can make sense of how a fridge can be said to be ‘empty’ of something specific like food. That is, the fridge, while not empty of anything, is empty of a particular thing, food. The everyday usage of the term thus captures a qualified sense of emptiness that can serve a particular practical purpose (e.g., in terms of knowing when one needs to do some shopping). Similarly, while nothing on this view is really flat, we can nonetheless make sense of how a country like Holland can be said to be ‘flat’. That is, while Holland is not absolutely flat (since nothing is), it is flat *for a country* (e.g., when compared with Switzerland). As before, the everyday usage of the term thus captures a qualified sense of flatness that can serve a particular practical purpose (e.g., in terms of knowing which country would be the best choice for a cycling holiday).

There is nothing especially mysterious about this, even granted the putatively absolute nature of the terms involved. As philosophers of science have noted, the ideal gas law is never instantiated in nature, but this doesn’t prevent it from being of tremendous practical use in relevant scientific contexts.¹⁵ We can thus make sense of a term satisfying a non-absolute standard in a way that is a suitable approximation of an absolute standard.

In order to account for the practical utility of these everyday assertions of absolute terms like ‘flat’ and ‘empty’, however, it is important that the everyday assertions do approximate in relevant ways to the relevant absolute standard. The fridge really needs to be empty of foodstuffs, and the country really needs to be flat for a country. If nothing even approximates to the standards in question, however, then the practical utility disappears. If emptiness or flatness never applies to anything, even in a qualified sense, then what practical point would it serve to describe anything as ‘flat’ or ‘empty’?

With this in mind, let’s consider the kind of claim that sceptical invariantism makes about our use of knowledge ascriptions in everyday contexts. The idea is that, just as with our everyday use of ‘empty’ and ‘flat’, these ascriptions, while false because we cannot satisfy the absolute epistemic standard, are practically useful because we are able to approximate to it. In the epistemic context this can only mean that we satisfy some fallible standard for knowledge, such that we have an epistemic basis for our beliefs which, although insufficient to rule-out radical sceptical hypotheses, is nonetheless sufficient to rule-out local error possibilities. Given what we have argued in the previous section about how radical scepticism does not essentially trade on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard, however, this claim is evidently dubious. In particular, the sceptical invariantist is clearly presupposing that our beliefs satisfy a weak epistemic standard, one that suffices for the practical utility of our knowledge ascriptions even though it cannot make them true. But we have seen that the radical sceptical paradox, properly understood, calls even that

weaker epistemic standing into question. Since sceptical invariantism doesn't offer any basis for rejecting the claims that make up this paradox (beyond insisting that we do lack the widespread everyday knowledge in question), it follows that it simply cannot help itself to the story that it tells about the propriety of our everyday use of false knowledge ascriptions.

This severely undermines the plausibility of sceptical invariantism. We noted earlier that a core part of the appeal of the proposal lies in the undercutting response it offers to the radical sceptical paradox. The undercutting credentials of the view in turn rest on the account it offers of what our everyday practices of knowledge ascriptions are doing if they aren't in the business of expressing truths. That account has shown to be of dubious pedigree. But without this undercutting story then sceptical invariantism no longer has a way of explaining, consistent with our everyday epistemic practices, how the claim that we have widespread knowledge could be false. When we couple this fact with the previous point that sceptical invariantism also misdiagnoses the source of radical scepticism—by mistakenly thinking that it essentially trades on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard—then it is hard to see what is left to recommend the view.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have argued that sceptical invariantism fails because it misunderstands the nature of the radical sceptical challenge. In particular, this challenge does not rest in any essential way on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard for knowledge as sceptical invariantism presupposes. As we have seen, this point undermines not only the credibility of sceptical invariantism as a response to the radical sceptical paradox, but also the supporting story that sceptical invariantism offers concerning the propriety of our false everyday knowledge ascriptions.

If the problem of radical scepticism does not essentially turn on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard for knowledge, then what is motivating it? I think we have witnessed enough to offer the essentials of an answer to this question. For the underlying issue is whether, even in the very best epistemic conditions, the rational standing that our beliefs enjoy is compatible with those beliefs being, nonetheless, mostly false. Elsewhere I have referred to this claim as the *insularity of reasons thesis*.¹⁶ With this claim in play, radical scepticism immediately gets a grip, since it follows that one can always generate scenarios where one's beliefs are mostly false but where they nonetheless enjoy the very same level of rational standing. On this way of thinking about radical scepticism, radical sceptical hypotheses are not a way of raising the epistemic standards, but rather simply devices that make explicit what seems to be implicit in our epistemic practices—*viz.*, our

commitment to the insularity of reasons thesis.¹⁷

If the foregoing is right, then while our critical focus has been sceptical invariantism, the critique that we have offered will be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to any treatment of radical scepticism which similarly treats the sceptical problem as essentially trading on an appeal to an austere epistemic standard for knowledge. In particular, both the low-standards invariantism and the contextualism that we noted above will be subject to this critique, given that they aim to resolve the sceptical problem by, in essence, making the case for a low epistemic standard for knowledge that we can satisfy (at least within a particular context of epistemic evaluation). Our critique of sceptical invariantism thus has a wider application to the broader contemporary debate about radical scepticism.¹⁸

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NOTES

¹ Or, at least, very few are ever truthfully asserted. See Bonjour (2010) for a version of sceptical invariantism that allows for there to be knowledge of a restricted class of propositions, of a kind where we are held to be able to meet the austere epistemic standard in play (e.g., propositions regarding the apparent content of one's immediate experiences). Since it doesn't really matter to the radical nature of this sceptical proposal whether all or only most knowledge ascriptions are never truthfully asserted, I will set this complication to one side in what follows and express the view in its most straightforward, and thus strongest, form.

² See also Unger (1984), which argues for an agnostic stance between sceptical invariantism and a version of contextualism (broadly of the kind that we are about to consider).

³ At least where radical scepticism is understood as a *position*. The importance of this point will become apparent below.

⁴ For some key recent discussions of this proposal, in addition to the original presentation by Unger (1971; 1975; 1984), see Hawthorne (2004, ch. 3), Dinges (2016), Kyriacou (2017; 2019; *forthcoming*), and Fassio (2018). See also Bonjour (2010).

⁵ For some of the key defences of (attributor) contextualism which are explicitly advanced to deal with the problem of radical scepticism, see DeRose (1995), Lewis (1996), and Cohen (2000). Interestingly, in later work Unger (1984) explores a similar proposal, as a competitor to the sceptical invariantism that he previously developed.

⁶ As such, my critique of these three views would also apply to any other proposal with regard to radical scepticism that effectively understands the sceptical problem in terms of the putative difficulty of satisfying an austere epistemic standard. For example, it would apply to the subject-sensitive invariantism defended by Fantl & McGrath (2002; 2007; 2009), Hawthorne (2004), and Stanley (2005). It would also apply to non-standard versions of attributor contextualism, such as the contrastivism defended by Schaffer (2004; 2005), the evidential contextualism defended by Neta (2002; 2003), and the inferential contextualism defended by Williams (1991). I offer specific critiques of all these positions elsewhere—see especially Pritchard (2015, *passim*), but also Pritchard (2008*a*; 2018*a*; 2018*d*).

⁷ Interestingly, as noted above, Unger (1971; 1975), the foremost exponent of sceptical invariantism, is unusual in that he does treat the sceptical problem as involving a demand for certainty. As we also noted above, however, it doesn't seem to be essential to sceptical invariantism that it makes this claim (and it's arguably a much stronger position without it). Besides, Unger also appeals to radical sceptical hypotheses and the fact that we cannot exclude them as a reason why we can't be absolutely certain, so such error-possibilities are still essentially in play even on his presentation of sceptical invariantism.

⁸ Overriding responses to paradoxes are thus essentially revisionary. As Schiffer (1996, 330) memorably puts the point, if radical scepticism poses a genuine paradox then there is no "happy face" solution to this problem, only a "sad face" solution, because it would mean that there is indeed a "deep-seated incoherence" within our pre-theoretical epistemological commitments. For further discussion of undercutting and overriding responses to radical scepticism, and their significance, see Pritchard (2014; 2015, part one). In this regard, see also the therapeutic/theoretical distinction presented by Williams (1991, ch. 1), and the obstacle-removing/obstacle-overcoming distinction described by Cassam (2007).

⁹ This is essentially the line of argument presented by Stroud (1984, ch. 2) against ordinary language responses to radical scepticism, of which Austin (1961) is held to be an exponent. For further discussion, see Pritchard (2014).

¹⁰ See Kyriacou (*forthcoming*) for further discussion of this point.

¹¹ This particular diachronic formulation of the closure principle is usually associated with Williamson (2000, 117) and Hawthorne (2005, 29). I offer my own defence of why this particular formulation of closure is the relevant one to focus on when presenting the radical sceptical paradox in Pritchard (2015, part one). I'm not aware of anyone who denies the closure principle as it is formulated here. For some prominent denials of earlier formulations of the closure principle (synchronic formulations that are implausible independently of the role of this principle in the radical sceptical paradox), see Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981). For further discussion of the status of (versions of) the closure principle, see the exchange between Dretske (2005*a*; 2005*b*) and Hawthorne (2005).

¹² For more on this point in the specific case of contextualism, see Pritchard (2018*a*).

¹³ As it happens, I argue that it isn't equivalent—see Pritchard (2005*b*, 2005*c*, 2015, part one) for the details—but the differences between the two formulations needn't concern us here.

¹⁴ I defend epistemological disjunctivism in Pritchard (2008*b*; 2012), drawing upon earlier work by McDowell (e.g., 1995).

¹⁵ This example is one of the key cases that Elgin (e.g., 2017, *passim*) uses to illustrate the practical utility of idealizations in science.

¹⁶ See, especially, Pritchard (2015, part one).

¹⁷ There are further complications in play here, though they are largely orthogonal to our present concerns. In particular, as I argue in Pritchard (2015, *passim*), there is also a second source of scepticism in the form of the *universality of rational evaluation thesis*, which is the claim that one can in principle rationally evaluate all of one's beliefs at once. As I argue, this thesis looms large with regard to closure-based radical scepticism in particular, while the insularity of reasons thesis is more relevant to underdetermination-based radical scepticism. This distinction has

important consequences for how we respond to the problem of radical scepticism, though it would take us too far afield to get drawn into these issues here.

¹⁸ I am very grateful to Michael Ebling and Christos Kyriacou for detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper.