

# Can Skeptics Earn Their Keep?

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## §1 Introduction

The history of epistemology can plausibly be summarized in terms of conversations with the skeptic, but in much of the twentieth century, skepticism was not taken very seriously. It was a position assumed to be false, with the primary remaining question one of explaining the grounds for concluding that it is in error.

My goal here is to move toward a positive account in the opposite direction. As I will metaphorically put it, I want to begin to explain why skeptics are legitimate residents of the epistemological estate, why they deserve a place at the epistemological table.

To understand the target, let's first distinguish skeptical arguments from skepticism itself. The arguments are something every epistemology must cope with, but the conclusion toward which those arguments point is different from the arguments, and need not demand our attention merely because the arguments themselves do, beyond having to figure out where the argument goes wrong.

One can view the Moorean common sense tradition as arising from this distinction. Moore isn't a skeptic and claims that skepticism is self-contradictory.<sup>1</sup> But that doesn't mean that the arguments for skepticism can be ignored. Moore infamously thought those arguments could be disposed of fairly easily, but even if he is right, taking out the trash will still need to be done.

Many think, however, that skeptical arguments are not so easily dismissed, and this possibility leads to a further distinction relevant to the goal of denying the skeptic a seat at the table. For, among those who reject the easy dismissal of skeptical arguments on the basis of some common sense theorizing, the typical practice is to jump from the arguments themselves to a rhetorical or dialectical context in which the skeptic is asserting and defending the conclusion of these skeptical arguments. Perhaps the idea here is that if we want to deny the skeptic

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<sup>1</sup>See especially [Moore \(1925\)](#).

a seat at the table, there would be no better way to do so than to show they must be quiet.

Here, though, a distinction is elided in a way that masks where to start taking up the question of the status of skepticism within the domain of epistemology. As I see it, the initial challenge from the common sense tradition is not in the rhetorical or dialectical context where some find grounds for converting skeptics into quietists, but rather in the intermediate arena between the skeptical arguments and this rhetorical context. In between we need to find a substantive position, developed and articulated in a way similar to the kinds of advanced theory that we find among other players in the game, including coherentists, foundationalists, reliabilists, as well as safety, sensitivity, and truth tracking theorists. As the case of foundationalism shows clearly, there is a difference between foundationalism as a mature theory of justification and knowledge and a mere foundationalist thesis as the conclusion of a regress argument. If foundationalists had only the regress argument in their bag of tricks, they would no more have earned their epistemological keep than would a skeptic who has nothing to offer but skeptical arguments for a bare skeptical thesis.

This distinction between a bare thesis and a mature theory is vague, so we will need to leave open exactly how and when a theorist has successfully moved from mere argumentation for a bare thesis to a substantive theoretical stance. My intention is to focus on this intermediate element which lies between skeptical arguments and the rhetorical context in which skeptics are taken to be asserting and defending their view. In between is the stage that involves theory development and articulation, the land of the skeptical position itself.

My motivation for focusing at this element has two aspects. The first concerns the effort to convert skeptics into quietists, thinking that's a decent ploy for showing they have no place at the table. Arguments to this effect arise when one endorses, for example, the the knowledge norm of assertion, according to which it is not OK to say what one doesn't know to be true. It also arises if the speech act of saying or asserting involves representing oneself as knowing.

I think these arguments overreach. Even if knowledge is the norm of assertion, it is a *pro tanto* norm only and not an absolute one. Moreover, if a representation that one knows is produced by assertion, implicatures in general are thought to be cancellable, so this particular problem might be able to be overcome by skeptics simply by adding a denial that they are not claiming to know that the position they are asserting is true. One final point as well: there is the *tu quoque* worry where the stances and assertions of non-skeptical epistemologists are likely to fail to live up to the conversational maxims and norms of assertion that are being

wielded against the skeptic. After all, responsible judgment favors the conclusion that, in philosophy, we don't really know that the positive theories and theses that we defend are correct. Nor is any facile dismissal of *ad hominem* argumentation possible here, for such argumentation is most plausible in rhetorical contexts, which is precisely the context being used to undermine the skeptic here.

That's the first aspect of my motivation for focusing on the position of the skeptic rather than the dialectical context in which that position is asserted and defended. The second is that it is rare for discussions of skepticism to focus on this intermediate element, and even when they do, they easily move from focusing on the position itself to focusing on the dialectical context instead. G.E. Moore provides an example of this unfortunate tendency. As noted already, Moore claims that skepticism is self-contradictory: "This view [that we don't know the common sense claims that Moore claims we know] . . . has, I think, the defect that . . . it really is self-contradictory, i.e., entails both of two mutually incompatible propositions." (Moore 1925, pp. 41–43) If the view—the skeptical position itself, or an immediate implication of it—entails both of two mutually incompatible propositions, we would have an example of a proper response by non-skeptics to the skeptical position itself, rather than a response focusing on the rhetorical or dialectical context. Yet, as Moore develops his argument for the advertised self-contradictory character of skepticism, he shifts from this point to one more relevant to the rhetorical or dialectic context of defenses of skepticism:

Now the remarkable thing which those who take this view have not, I think, in general duly appreciated, is that, in each case, the philosopher who takes it is making an assertion about 'us' . . . . In other words, he asserts with confidence that these beliefs *are* beliefs of Common Sense, and seems often to fail to notice that, *if* they are, they must be true . . . . This is why this position . . . seems to me to be self-contradictory. (Moore 1925, pp. 41–43, emphasis in the original)

Notice the language shift between talk the position itself to talk about asserting it. Moore's specific claim is that it is the asserting itself that gets the skeptic in trouble, since the content of the assertion entails that (some of) the claims of Common Sense must be true. Here we find an illuminating instance of the tendency to substitute discussion of the dialectical or rhetorical situation for the advertised opposition to the skeptical position itself. Moore's argument can show, at most, that the skeptic has beliefs that entail the truth of the beliefs of common sense. Such an argument, however, doesn't show that skepticism is self-contradictory. If

one wishes to fulfill the promise of the Moorean accusation, one will have to show a more disciplined focus on the skeptical position itself.

These points create both a burden and a benefit to skepticism. The benefit is that the skeptical position itself can emerge unscathed even if skeptics must be quietists and even if the arguments for some bare skeptical thesis are problematic in some way. The burden, however, is that skeptics earn their keep only to the extent that they can develop and articulate a theoretical position goes beyond a mere skeptical conclusion drawn from one or more skeptical arguments. In spite of the vagueness of the distinction between a bare skeptical thesis and a skeptical conclusion, there is a line of argument that I will pursue here that will make the distinction more precise, aid the skeptic in articulating a skeptical position, but also reveal what appears at first glance to be a decisive problem for skepticism. Over the next three sections, I will develop this line of argument that presents both this benefit and this burden to the skeptic. In §5, I then take up what appears by the end of §4 to be an insurmountable hurdle, revealing resources available to the skeptic for escaping the problem. The final section §6 reflects on where this leaves the skeptic. As we will see, it allows the skeptic to avoid the Moorean charge of incoherence, though it leaves considerable challenges to skepticism in place. This result, however, leaves skepticism in the same situation as other non-skeptical positions concerning the nature and scope of human knowledge. The ultimate conclusion, then, will be that skeptics would be wise to endorse the line of argumentation deployed here, thereby developing a substantive epistemology that earns them a place at the table, that earns their keep, even if the difficulties faced by the position they hold remain significant.

## §2 Imperialism and the Piecemeal Strategy

If the skeptical position is self-undermining or self-defeating or self-contradictory, as Moore claimed but failed to vindicate, we will need an explanation why. Here is one such attempt. Skeptics insist, one might say, that no argument or evidence for any claim is good enough unless it meets very high epistemic standards. For short, we can say that skeptics insist that knowledge requires infallibility, and the first task for skeptics is to explain this notion of this gold standard for epistemic status.

To see what such an explanation should look like, an analogy with Occasionalism is useful. The Occasionalist holds a view about power and causation that is similarly restrictive to the position that the skeptic endorses about knowledge.

Neither position claims that knowledge or power is impossible, but only that the standards for the presence of knowledge or a display of power are so high as to be unattainable for limited beings such as we are. Occasionalists decry our vain attempts to characterize power in terms of counterfactuals, INUS conditions, nomological necessities, and realized dispositions, classifying such efforts as describing at best *faux* power, a poor imitation of the real thing. So what is the real thing here? What is this gold standard for real power? Here Occasionalists point to divine power: “God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.” This conjunction is no mere following of one event after another, but rather a connection involving unrestricted, absolute necessity. That, the occasionalist says, is what real power is. Anything else, anything less, is an imposter suitable only for peddling by mountebanks.

This view is coherent so far as it goes, but is subject to immediate objection. It is guilty of imperialism, the objector claims. The occasionalist has myopically focused on one particularly impressive kind of power, and generalized on that vision, confusing what power would look like for a divine being with what power would look like for a limited being. So instead of identifying the gold standard for what real power is like, the occasionalist has only identified a standard for what divine power is like. Explaining further, the objection can be converted into a rebuttal, pointing out that the underlying vision is one where a relevant modal space is under the control of a being with power. In such a case, for a divine being, it is the entire range of metaphysical possibilities that is encompassed by any divine power to do anything, if one is assuming that a divine being will be a necessary being.<sup>2</sup> Yet, if the underlying vision is about relevant modal space, we should find relativizations of the totality of modal space that are relevant when talking about the possibility of power for limited beings. For example, one might think that ordinary persons are subject to laws of nature whereas God is not, and one might thus propose the expectation of a relativization to nomological necessity when addressing the question of the scope and nature of our powers as opposed to those of a divine being. In addition, whereas it is typical to argue or assume monotheism in the context of discussions of divine beings, no such uniqueness thesis should play a role in discussing the possibility of power by more limited beings; and this fact shows an additional need to constrain the modal space further, in a way that abstracts from the interactions between purported powers of other beings.

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<sup>2</sup>If the occasionalist is squeamish about necessary existence, the fallback position would then be that there is no region of metaphysical space *where this being is found* that is not under the control of the power in question.

The central idea involved in this objection and rebuttal to Occasionalism is this: it is a sign of imperialism to impose the standards for divine power on limited beings, applying the rules and principles appropriate to one kind of being are illicitly assumed to apply to every kind of being. The rebuttal thus insists that one shouldn't confuse divine power with what created entities might be able to accomplish. Perhaps, to use medieval language, such accomplishments can only be described in terms of a kind of secondary causation or power, in contrast to the power of primary causation involved in divine acts of will, but (the rebutter insists) it's a confusion to identify such second-class power with having no power at all.

At this point, Occasionalists might dig in and try to show that no such imperialism is on display, or that if it is, it is not objectionable. This row is hard to hoe, however, for it is fairly obvious that the initial motivating context for the view is as the objection claims: Occasionalism arises through considerations of what is involved in God's creative activity. So a better strategy would seem to be to grant the force of the objection and proceed to characterize the gold standard more generally, starting with efforts at thinking about the range of modal space relevant to the possibility of power for non-divine beings. The goal would still be to be able to show that all power is God's power, but the advantage of this piecemeal strategy is that it starts from a straightforward admission of the obvious concerning the source of the account. Occasionalism finds its source in theological contexts, especially the context of creation itself, and when thinking about God's power and the kind of control that is on display in divine acts of will, the inference to the language of absolute, metaphysical possibility is natural and compelling. Yet, if the conclusion that all power is God's power is to be sustained, the Occasionalist needs to be able to get to this language of necessity from other starting points as well, and in so doing, will generate a suitable response to the imperialism charge.

The Occasionalist might then distinguish between divine power and natural power, insisting that both have to involve some reach through modal space. But whereas the form has to spread out through all of metaphysical space, the latter needs only a reach across all of nomological space. Hence, natural power is only displayed when the only metaphysical possibilities for the aim of the display of power to fail to be realized are nomological impossibilities. In slightly misleading slogan form, power is present only when it would take a miracle to stop its force. And, such an occasionalist might insist, there is no such power in nature.

Once the journey is begun down the path of this piecemeal strategy in response to the charge of imperialism, however, this last attempt to show that there is no power other than divine power will face a further animadversion of the imperi-

alism charge. For, as noted above, one standard assumption about the difference between natural and theological contexts concerns ontological uniqueness: in the former realm, multiplicity reigns; in the latter, monotheism rules. So, when going piecemeal, one has to consider both what should be said about contexts involving uniqueness as well as contexts involving multiplicity. This point is especially relevant to the description of the reach of finite power in the last paragraph, where the description is most suitable to contexts involving uniqueness, for only in those cases do we avoid the complications that result from interactions between the purported powers of finite beings. Once multiplicity is assumed, the modal space in question has to be restricted so as not to require a display of modal power to extend to the entire range of nomological space. What sort of restriction is needed here isn't clear, but a good start is to think in terms of controlling for competing factors before trying to assess whether power or causation is present. Doing so with restrict the domain of nomological possibility, and the piecemeal strategy will have to show that even with such further restrictions in place, there is no power in nature.

We need to pursue this issue further in our context, even though the Occasionalist has argumentational resources here that are not widely appreciated. For our context, the discussion of Occasionalism is relevant only as an analogy for what skeptics must do to earn their keep on the epistemological estate. Central to the analogy is some suitable motivation for the view that leads to a careful articulation of the gold standard for a display of the phenomenon in question (power or knowledge), together with a response to the imperialism charge when critics notice the possibility of myopia when generalizing that standard beyond the context of the original motivation for it.

Once the standard is articulated, there is a further step that is necessary for a defense of either position, a step I want to note briefly and then shelve in order to focus on this first step concerning the gold standard, the imperialism charge, and the piecemeal strategy for responding to it. The second step raise the possibility that certain approximations to the gold standard can be close enough for a description in terms of power or knowledge to be accurate or correct. Some arrows hit the bullseye without hitting it dead center, and perhaps in the same way, some claims about the presence of knowledge or power are accurate enough to count as correct (true) even though other claims in other contexts are more perfect approximations to the ideal. These concerns will call to mind the kinds of arguments in [Unger \(1975\)](#) concerning the identity of flatness with absolute flatness, but here I will forego further discussion of this issue to focus on the aspects of the initial step noted above.

The point of the analogy with Occasionalism, then, is to provide a useful model for what is needed for skeptics to earn their keep on the epistemological estate. The need in question concerns the intermediate issue of the skeptical position itself, falling between the skeptical arguments that all epistemologies must address and the rhetorical or dialectical context in which discussions between skeptics and non-skeptics occur. Concerning this intermediate issue, skeptics will begin by articulating a gold standard for epistemic success, and then find a way to accommodate a charge of imperialism that will arise for this account. We turn, then, to focus on skepticism itself.

### §3 Skepticism's *Apologia*

The first section of the road to respectability for skeptics is much like that for occasionalists. Occasionalists are characterizing a modal notion, and the initial gambit is to appeal to God-like features to characterize it. They do not begin, however, with the idea that one must be all-powerful in order to have any power at all, but rather with the more limited idea that in whatever domain power is possessed, it must be power that mimics divine power. Just so with skeptics. They too appeal to God-like features when characterizing what is required for knowledge, but they do not do so by claiming that one must be omniscient in order to have any knowledge at all. Instead, they need rely only on the idea that God-like knowledge involves essential omniscience, which implies the complete impossibility of mistake. So, skepticism begins from the idea that the presence of knowledge demands immunity from the possibility of error.

But here the skeptic faces greater difficulty than the occasionalist, for the account of knowledge in terms of such immunity is both too strong and too weak, even given the perspective of the skeptic. It is too strong since not even the Cartesian goal of the *Meditations* requires such impossibility. If Descartes had thought that the way to get his intellectual house in order required showing that he was, after all, incapable of error, we should have expected a much different argumentative path to have been followed. I have no idea what such a path would look like, but the actual path Descartes follows isn't one that aims at showing that Descartes is incapable of error and confusion. Moreover, any attraction for skepticism should point to the Cartesian project with admiration: it is just the sort of project that is demanded by the specter of skepticism. So a claim that knowledge demands immunity from the possibility of error is simply outlandish.

Thus, unlike Occasionalism, skepticism does not have theological motivations,

but is instead motivated by an idealization of the exemplary accomplishments we find in mathematics and logic. Here the language of proof and guarantees of truth are most at home, so perhaps skeptics can characterize the kind of immunity from error in terms of an infallibility arising from the guarantees of truth generated by sound proofs.

Such an approach to the nature of knowledge is too weak, however, since this account of infallibility can be met by positions that I have referred to as “Cheap Infallibilisms,” which are best understood as embracing a special version of fallibilism.<sup>3</sup> The poster child for such views is Timothy Williamson, whose approach to knowledge is a form of evidentialism that secures the guarantee of truth provided by your evidence for what you believe only through an identification of your evidence with what you know. As one accrues more and more evidence in favor of a claim, its epistemic probability rises, but only high enough for knowledge when the knowledge claim itself is added to one’s body of evidence so as to secure the result that the claim has to be true given that evidence.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the merits of this view, it clearly doesn’t warm the heart of the skeptic, as does the Cartesian project in the *Meditations*. No self-respecting skeptic would view the potential of the Williamsonian project as a threat to skepticism, since it is such a clear instance of a view of knowledge that does not meet the high standards of the skeptic, unlike the Cartesian project itself.

If we are going to try to characterize the infallibility of knowledge central to skepticism in terms of the language of proof and guarantees of truth, we will have more success in following the lead of Baron Reed. He argues in (Reed 2012) that the proper way to characterize (this strain of) infallibilism<sup>5</sup> in terms of a justification that could have failed to produce knowledge. Such a failure could occur under either of two conditions. One possibility is that the justification fails to entail the truth of what is believed, and the other possibility is where there is only an accidental connection between justification and truth, presumably the kind of case that is fodder for Gettier problems. As we will see later on, a better approach will introduce a modal condition as well, but for present purposes, this justificational

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<sup>3</sup>See Kvanvig (2014, Ch. 2, §5).

<sup>4</sup>For defense and elaboration, see Williamson (2000) and for critical discussion, see Brown (2018).

<sup>5</sup>As I understand the fallibilism/infallibilism distinction, it is a metatheoretical one, and so should be characterized in a way that allows a theory of knowledge to be fall into one of the two categories even when that theory of knowledge eschews any connection between knowledge and justification. For example, safety and sensitivity theories ought to be able to count as fallible theories of knowledge. So, the discussion in the text is best thought of in terms of classifying certain kinds of justificational theories of knowledge only.

story is a good place to start.

Just as we saw with Occasionalism, however, there is an imperialism charge that must be met by such a characterization. As noted already, such an account of epistemic support finds its natural home in the domain of logic and mathematics, where monotonicity reigns and the language of truth-perserving consequence relations is in focus. The challenge to skepticism is how to embrace such an account of epistemic support without being guilty of the myopia that leads to the charge of imperialism. For if skeptics insist on restricting knowledge to patterns of inference or quality of evidence that provides some guarantee of truth, we should be as unmoved by this insistence as we are when Humeans tell us that inductive arguments about the future are no good because they aren't deductive ones. Hume famously insisted that we have no grounds for thinking that sun will rise tomorrow since our only evidence for this claim is past patterns concerning the rising of the sun, and that evidence is consistent with the sun not rising. But that objection to the argument form in question simply amounts to saying that non-monotonic reasoning isn't any good because it isn't monotonic. No vigilant anti-skeptic will miss the opportunity to smile wryly at such argumentation. The imperialism on display is hard to miss.

As with Occasionalism, there is a road for the stubborn to take, those who will continue to insist on the standard and simply refuse to acknowledge any probative value in the imperialism charge. Moreover, the argumentative strategies employed in such a journey are significant to every epistemology, since they will be part and parcel of the collection of skeptical arguments that have already been acknowledged to be of epistemological significance. Such stubbornness will not make progress, however, on the issue before us, since the project of earning one's keep demands more of the skeptic than can be achieved by merely pointing to additional arguments on behalf of skepticism.

Some elaboration of this point may be helpful. One might anticipate stubbornness in response to the imperialism charge, with an insistence that there is no domain-specific natural home for skeptical concerns that can be traced to the domains of logic and mathematics. One might imagine such a response from Occasionalists as well. What is important to note in both cases, however, is that the concern is not about the motivations for either skepticism or Occasionalism, but rather the neatness of fit between the views and the contexts in question. When defenders of either position balk at a characterization of their motivations in terms of those areas, the resistance is well-taken but irrelevant to the central point. For that point is that the views developed seem more plausible for some domains than others, and such differential plausibility is what leads directly to

the imperialism charge. Moreover, if the charge is met with obstinacy, the cost to the skeptic is steep. For if the charge cannot be accommodated or ameliorated by further development and articulation of the skeptical position, all that the skeptic has as resources are the basic arguments for skepticism, and as we have already seen, those arguments alone augur for no place at the table. To repeat, there are the skeptical arguments, there is the potential for the articulation and development of the skeptical position itself, and there is the rhetorical or dialectical situation involving conversations with the skeptic. For skeptics to earn their keep, one would like to see all three of these free from difficulty, but at the very least, there must be more than the skeptical arguments themselves.

Viewed in this way, the skeptic may plausibly view the imperialism charge as a welcome invitation, a potential objection that can be met by developing and articulating the skeptical position in a way that presents a substantive epistemology theory, beyond the mere negative conclusion of one's favorite skeptical arguments.

So, if the goal is to earn one's keep, the wisest skeptical strategy is to shoulder the burden of replying to the imperialism charge. What is needed here is an account of the skeptical position itself, a theoretical development and articulation of a point of view that goes beyond merely a collection of arguments for the conclusion that knowledge is impossible. To that end, the best strategy is not a more obstinate and adamant embracing of premises in support of a skeptical conclusion, but a more nuanced recognition of the probative value of the imperialism charge. Once such recognition occurs and the burden of responding appropriately to it is shouldered, the skeptic has, at least, turned down a promising road. For it is a road that can't be traveled without carefully developing a point of view so as to accommodate the imperialism charge. Such a development is just what we expect of positions deserving a place at the epistemological table.

We can see this point more clearly by considering the relationship between foundationalism as an epistemological theory and foundationalism as a conclusion one might try to derive from the regress argument. That argument matters to everyone, but if all foundationalism had going for it was as a conclusion to draw from the regress argument, it would not meet the requirements on theory development that are needed to deserve a place at the table. For that, we want to see signs of a mature theory, rather than merely some starting point from which one might begin the project of theory construction.

Just so with skepticism. To earn their keep, skeptics have to shoulder the burden of theory construction rather than settling for identifying argumentative strategies in support of the starting point for such theory development.

As I see it, this issue is epistemically prior to that of whether there are rhetor-

ical or dialectical problems that force skeptics to keep quiet. If there is no theory development of the skeptical position itself, they have no place at the table to discuss which theory of knowledge should be part of our general understanding of the world and our place in it, and hence no need to unsheath any weapon designed to impose silence on skeptics.

I believe this concern is the primary motivating concern in the Moorean incarnation of the common sense tradition. Moore's intent was not merely to reduce the skeptic to silence, but to show a central theoretical incoherence in the skeptical position itself. His efforts to show such incoherence failed, I believe, but the challenge to the skeptic of avoiding theoretical incoherence is daunting, once we convince skeptics of the need to accommodate the imperialism charge and shoulder the burden of theory construction. It is the task of the next section to show why.

## §4 Going Piecemeal

The heart of the imperialism charge is to insist that we don't say the same things about knowledge in other areas that we say about knowledge in mathematics and knowledge. That is not to say, however, that knowledge in one area has nothing in common with knowledge another area. It is to insist, instead, that we don't collapse differences in order to maintain commonality.

So, once the probative value of the imperialism charge is acknowledged, we should turn first to the question of what other domains we should be thinking about in addition to the domain of logic and mathematics. An answer to this question will obviously advert to the empirical domain where epistemic credentials are provided for by observation, but also to the more theoretical domain where reasoning of a non-demonstrative sort is responsible for epistemic status. It will also be necessary to talk about social epistemological issues surrounding testimony, but we can first focus on non-testimonial contexts in order to see how daunting is the challenge to the skeptic once the imperialism charge is raised.

The best strategy for the skeptic here is to try to derive the high standards for knowledge that skepticism demands by idealizing the practices relevant to each domain. Such idealization was already at work in characterizing infallibility for demonstrative reasoning, for it isn't enough to satisfy the skeptic to have premises or use evidence that entails the truth of what one believes. It is not enough to reason as our best logicians and mathematicians actually reason, for even though their premises entail their conclusions, the epistemic support that

is present doesn't guarantee knowledge. The premises might not have sufficient epistemic standing for that, and the reasoning itself might not be immune from undercutting defeaters. So, when the skeptic initially characterizes the gold standard in question, the entailment relation between evidence and conclusion must be supplemented by additional features that express the idealization that generates them, ruling out the possibility of satisfying those conditions while knowledge is absent.

Let's suppose that the skeptic has succeeded in characterizing this idealization for the domain of logic and mathematics, and now is considering how to idealize in other domains so as to secure the same result, the result that knowledge just be infallible in the sense just characterized. For observational practices, one might resort to the kind of idealization registered in fictional contexts, as when the eye of Sauron may not be all-seeing, but it is never (and cannot?) be mistaken about that which is in its attentional focus.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, skeptics might idealize memory capacities in the way that L. Ron Hubbard fabricates, so that what enters the memory module stays permanently (of necessity?), with only retrieval capacities in question. Moreover, if we idealize retrieval capacities on the same model as those of perception, perhaps we can characterize the kind of infallibility for observational domains in a way that provides some comfort to skeptics wishing to shoulder the burden of accommodating the imperialism charge against their initial statement of what knowledge involves.

The elephant in the room, however, isn't so much the domain of observation, but rather the domain of non-monotonic reasoning, of the sort we find when trying to predict the future and trying to discern the correct or best theoretical explanations of the data provided by experience. It is here that the Moorean hope for showing the incoherence of skepticism is the most promising. For it appears that what the skeptic hopes to find is a way to idealize non-monotonic reasoning in such a way that it really is monotonic!

At this point, skeptics may question the wisdom of having shouldered the burden of accommodating the imperialism charge. After all, if you are asked to undertake a task, and you agree to do so, only to be told that the task is that of building Penrose stairway,<sup>7</sup> it is easy to see why you should retract your offer.

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<sup>6</sup>An aside: why is the distinction between awareness and attention paid so little attention in epistemology? Pre-theoretically, I should have thought that there is an obvious difference in epistemic significance between what one is aware of and what one focuses on. It is worth noting that epistemological theories that find a role for direct acquaintance may be signalling the same inclination I feel here. Even apart from direct acquaintance requirements, the epistemic significance of attention should in some way differ from that of awareness.

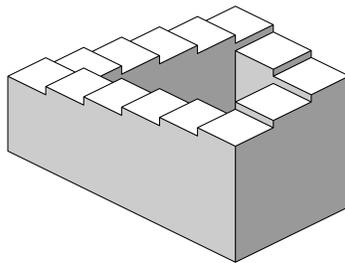
<sup>7</sup>A diagram:

Such a retraction would require further explanation of exactly how to move from bare thesis to mature theory, but none of the reasoning presented here is compelling enough to show that there is no road but this one. Still, there is a course of reasoning for how we got to this location, and if the situation is not as dire as just described, it is worth seeing where it takes us.

As stunning as the idea might seem, the skeptic is not being asked to do the impossible. Moreover, as I will argue in the next section, the task can actually be accomplished, and doing so has the benefit of showing exactly what the skeptical position involves, in just the way needed for skeptics to earn their keep. We turn then to the task of showing how non-monotonic reasoning can issue in infallible conclusions.

## §5 Infallible Non-Monotonic Reasoning

As with Occasionalism, it is easiest to see the path for the skeptic here in a theological context. For the Occasionalist, the theological context involved characterizing the nature of divine power, and for the skeptic, the strategy will be to clarify the possibility of omniscience arising out of defeasible reasoning. In the divine context, we imagine some ideal non-monotonic reasoning system, beginning from some set of imagined initial conditions to a complete and consistent story concerning what is true on the supposition in question. I have presented this account at length elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> so here I will aim more for highlighting the key steps. Central to such an account is an idealization about non-monotonic reasoning systems. There are a number of different approaches to such reasoning, all of which are subject to known defects,<sup>9</sup> so it doesn't much matter which approach we have in mind when thinking about such an idealization, but for my money,



<sup>8</sup>In [Kvanvig \(2011, Ch. 8\)](#).

<sup>9</sup>Explained thoroughly in [Koons \(2017\)](#).

I'd start with Pollock's Oscar program.<sup>10</sup> After having in place the initial conditions and the reasoning system, defeasible reasoning begins. Because the system is defeasible, the process is not cumulative, but can involve retracting earlier conclusions and replacing them with alternatives, and the process can also come to a halt when the information on hand at a given stage provides no epistemic basis for drawing further conclusions. In addition to these possibilities is the possibility of the system going to completion, generating a complete and consistent story for the set of suppositional initial conditions in question.

Consider then the cases where the system goes to completion. In such cases, we have a set of suppositional beliefs all of which meet internalist standards of rationality and justification. The argument for this conclusion rests on the quality of the idealization of the reasoning system, for if the resulting suppositional beliefs are not rational and justified, that is a compelling reason to think that we didn't idealize properly. Moreover, since the system of rational beliefs is both consistent and complete, there can be no external defeaters for the rationality of these beliefs, since all information is already internal to the system. External defeaters are, by definition, pieces of information outside the purview of the relevant cognizer. So the beliefs are all justified and rational, and undefeated, both internally and externally. Such beliefs, then, are sufficient from a purely epistemic point of view to count as knowledge, missing only the psychological element of belief and the semantic element of truth.

We can ignore the psychological element here, but not the semantic one. Skeptics, though, have the upperhand on this score. For the key issue here is whether truth leaves tracks, a nice slogan for a negative response to the issue of whether there can be unknowable truths. Here, the assumption that is central to the theological context is appropriate in the skeptical context as well. For if we begin our inquiry into whether non-monotonicity immediately undermines skepticism through the charge of imperialism, the skeptic must evade the criticism, not by assuming from the outset that there can be unknowable truths, but that there cannot be. For if skeptical position should itself be unconditional, not depending for its defense on some supposition that there are or can be unknowable truths.

If we assume, then, that truths leave tracks, then any ideal reasoning process will find these tracks in the process of going to completion, so if we find such completion, resulting in a complete and consistent system of information that is undefeated both internally and externally, we find an argument for the conclusion that the system of information is completely accurate as well. The result in a theological context is thus the conclusion that perfect foreknowledge is not in-

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<sup>10</sup>See, especially, [Pollock \(1989\)](#) and [Pollock \(1995\)](#).

compatible with conclusions derived by non-monotonic reasoning, even though the central feature of such reasoning is that the premises used do not guarantee the truth of their conclusions.

The final step in the theological context is the move from indefeasibility to infallibility, and this move relies on an appreciation of the nature of the reasoning process used to achieve suppositionally true and undefeated conclusions from an initial starting point. It is here that a generally unnoticed modal element of infallibility is relevant. On a justificational understanding of infallibility, one on which one's basis for belief provides a guarantee of truth or knowledge,<sup>11</sup> and we lose an element of control that is central to the notion of infallibility. Infallibility doesn't make one incapable of false belief, but it does put that possibility under one's control. In a theological context, such control can be achieved by God by limiting the options for creation to those suppositional starting points that generate complete stories, for then, under this control, there is no possibility under which creation occurs and foreknowledge fails.

This modal dimension of infallibility fits well with the Cartesian project. The success of that project never eliminates the possibility of false belief, for it is always possible for the will to outrun the understanding. But it does introduce a modal element of control, whereby each cognizer has the power to refrain from believing on the basis of anything other than the understanding. As I see it, this modal understanding of infallibility can then be combined with further epistemological assumptions to derive the guarantees of truth and knowledge that are often confused with infallibility itself.

This difference between being incapable of error and having the possibility of error under one's direct control helps the skeptic address an immediate objection. That objection is the same one we saw when considering the Occasionalist claim that all power involves metaphysical necessitation. The objection to Occasionalism was that this characterization is at best only a characterization of God-like power and thus provides no basis for insisting that power itself has to involve metaphysical necessitation. Here, a similar concern arises for skepticism, for the device used above to show the compatibility of infallibility with defeasible reasoning relies on theological elements, and thus might be accused of confusing

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<sup>11</sup>Notice the doxastic prejudice of this account: the basis in question has to be a basis for *belief*, for otherwise it could provide no guarantee for knowledge, leaving open the presence of the basis and the absence of belief. (This argument assumes, of course, the impossibility of non-doxastic knowledge.) Propositionalists about justification would like to see a justificational account of infallibility that references the propositional story only. Perhaps we could talk of a guarantee of being in a position to know, rather than a guarantee of knowledge itself, though the notion of being in a position to know is vexed (see, e.g., [David and Warfield \(2008\)](#)).

what would be appropriate to say about the nature of God's knowledge with the nature of knowledge itself.

The response available to the skeptic is clear, however, for the skeptic can point out that divine knowledge would involve something stronger than the kind of control central to the notion of infallibility. Divine cognition not only involves the capacity to avoid error, but such avoidance would seem to be an essential feature of divinity, making it impossible for God to have false or unjustified beliefs or any belief not known to be true. In this way, the skeptic can appeal to a theological context in the process of clarifying the gold standard for beliefs worth holding, and still not succumb to an initial challenge that claims that the skeptic is confusing divine knowledge with knowledge itself.

## §6 Concluding Remarks

Where does this result leave skeptics? Here we must be more precise about exactly what it means to have a place at the table. As I have said, there is a difference between the bare skeptical conclusion of some skeptical argument and the articulation of a position that entitles one to a place at the table. Moreover, having achieved such status still leaves the skeptic vulnerable to various rhetorical and dialectical challenges to the skeptic's capacity to give voice to the skeptical position, though I have also noted that such objections tend to overreach. They overreach, as I see it, because even those giving voice to such objections will be voicing positions that they don't know to be true either,<sup>12</sup> and so it will be difficult, to say the least, to undermine defenses by skeptics without also undermining defenses of positive, non-skeptical positions as well. In addition, there are many things that are *pro tanto* wrong to do that are fine, all things considered, and with respect to difficult and substantive questions relevant to the good life and our understanding of it, a larger amount of risk-taking at the individual level can easily lead to greater success in cooperative efforts to achieve a common goal.

Returning to the skeptical position itself, though, exactly what is the epistemic status achieved by our results? Here, some vagueness will remain. Perhaps we can say that there is a notion of a theoretical possibility that skepticism achieves in virtue of having developed a position that survives at least the initial Moorean attempts to demonstrate incoherence. Such a status, however, provides no assurance of how things will stand as further inquiry and objection is mounted. On

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<sup>12</sup>I've explained some of the basis for this skepticism about our positive philosophical theses in [Kvanvig \(2014\)](#), for those who find this remark eminently disputable, which it is!

this score, however, skeptics can take comfort in the realization that such a status is no different from that of foundationalists, coherentists, reliabilists, proper functionalists, and all the others who have developed a mature enough theory also to deserve a place at the table.

My central aim is thus realized. Skepticism does not deserve to be taken seriously merely because there are arguments that can be offered in support of a skeptical thesis. Being taken seriously requires serious philosophical effort at developing and characterizing a position—a theory—that goes beyond a mere thesis. Not even a compendium of arguments for the same conclusion constitutes such theory development, though of course it is easy to see how one might use such a compendium in completing the necessary tasks. As I have argued, the path to success for skeptics requires an articulation of a gold standard for knowledge, and specifying that standard requires something different from any entailment account of adequate evidence taken to codify what it is for an epistemic standing to be infallible. Once this burden is shouldered, the Moorean hope of burying the skeptic under the burden looks quite promising, for progress on the path requires articulating the gold standard in piecemeal fashion in order to avoid a charge of imperialism. The deepest challenge here is just what the history of epistemology asks us to focus on, which is the issue of non-monotonic, defeasible reasoning, insisting that one not demand of such reasoning what is legitimately demanded of the monotonic reasoning at home in logic and mathematics. Skeptics have resources to answer this challenge, however, and in the process of answering it, a theory is developed that cannot be accused of simply being a bare thesis that is the conclusion of skeptical arguments.

Quite a bit of work remains for skeptics, in spite of this success. For even if the gold standard can be articulated, non-skeptics can still agree on the ideality of the standard presented and yet maintain that some cognitive achievements that fail to be ideal in this way are nonetheless close enough approximations to it for claims of knowledge to count as correct. This issue of the possibility of correctness arising from close enough approximations to ideality takes us to a further issue that is beyond the scope of this paper. It is a topic best left, then, to another occasion, leaving the present conclusion to be simply this: the skeptical position can be developed suitably so that it is a serious theoretical possibility to be considered together with a host of other possibilities. In thinking that skeptics had to be incoherent, Moore was wrong. Skeptics need not be mere naysayers, but can shoulder the burden of developing a mature theory in the same way that non-skeptics can and have.

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