

The regress argument against Cartesian skepticism

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Does the external world exist, as it so concretely seems? Perhaps not, says the Cartesian skeptic. After all, if you were dreaming or hallucinating, if an evil demon were bent on deceiving you, or if, god forbid, you were a brain in a vat, things might appear to you in just the same way.¹ Why think, then, that you are experiencing good old reality rather than some dream or other fiction? Absent any way of distinguishing these cases, the reasonable thing to do is to cast a skeptical eye on your usual beliefs: you should doubt, you should have reservations about, whether the external world exists.²

Descartes, of course, thought that there was a way of distinguishing the cases, that proceeded circuitously through the fact that (though he could doubt whether the external world existed) he could not doubt whether he existed; such knowledge of the Cartesian ego, in combination with a supposedly undeceiving *deus ex machina* – revealed by the light of pure reason – served, Descartes thought, to get back the world.

Descartes's answer is unsatisfyingly ad hoc, whatever one's theistic inclinations. Nor have recent answers to the Cartesian skeptic been much better. Moore (1939) maintains that we may rest with what we naturally believe, or presuppositions thereof; but in context, this seems to beg the question, or at least not properly engage the skeptical concern, and similarly for views on which we need not rule out every conceivable defeater of our ordinary beliefs. Russell (1912, 1997) maintains that we may infer to the existence of the external world, as the best explanation of the pattern of our sense experience; but what qualifies the usual explanation as 'best'? Comprehensive skeptical scenarios also explain this pattern, and some on arguably simpler grounds. Relatedly, attempts (along lines of Dretske 1970 and Goldman 1976) to dismiss these scenarios as 'irrelevant' presuppose that we have some independent handle on what is actually the case; but this presupposition is exactly what the skeptic's cases aim to undermine.

There is a better route to the rejection of Cartesian skepticism. Suppose, as a result of contemplation of the Cartesian scenarios, I become skeptical about

1 'I will suppose... that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity....' (*First Meditation*)

2 In implementing his method of doubt, Descartes was inclined to suppose that 'we should even regard beliefs which can be doubted as false' (*Principles* 2); more weakly and standardly (as will be the case in what follows), doubt about P is understood as involving agnosticism about whether P, such that neither P nor not-P is warrantably assertable.

whether the external world exists. Does it follow that I am certain that I am so skeptical? No. For I may turn my skeptical attention to my seeming mental states, just as I may turn my skeptical attention to my seeming perceptions. Descartes appears to accept the possibility of mental state skepticism.³ Moreover, the common presentation of Descartes's cogito as resting on the claim that one cannot doubt that one is doubting (or more generally, on the 'transparency thesis') is incorrect: what the cogito rests on, and what Descartes correctly takes it to rest on, is that *someone* is undergoing *some* mental state – that is, is 'thinking'.⁴ In any case, had Descartes endorsed the transparency thesis, he would have been wrong to do so. After all, just as I may dream or hallucinate that I see something that I don't really see, I may dream or hallucinate that I believe (desire, etc.) something that I don't really believe (desire, etc.); just as an evil demon or a mad scientist might cause me to seemingly perceive something I don't really perceive, so might they cause me to seemingly believe (desire, etc.) something I don't really believe (desire, etc.).⁵ More specifically, in such scenarios I might be misled into thinking that I am skeptical about whether the external world exists, even if, as a matter of fact, I am not skeptical about this. By parallel reasoning, then: if contemplation of bad case scenarios suffices to induce me to be skeptical about whether the external world exists, then similar such contemplation should induce me to be skeptical about whether I really am in any given mental state that I take myself to be in – including, in particular, the mental state of being skeptical about whether the external world exists.

Now what? Given that I might be dreaming, hallucinating or sadly deceived into thinking that I am skeptical about the external world, then again by parallel reasoning, I should be skeptical about whether I really am in the state at issue – that is, I should be *skeptical* about whether I am *skeptical* about whether the external world exists. Now there's no stopping. For I might similarly be dreaming, hallucinating or sadly deceived into thinking that I am skeptical about whether I am skeptical about whether the external world exists, so that I should now be *skeptical* about whether I

3 '[M]any people do not know themselves what they believe, since believing something and knowing that one believes it are different acts of thinking, and the one often occurs without the other' (*Discourse on Method*); 'For experience shows that those who are the most strongly agitated by their passions are not those who know them best' (*Passions*); and elsewhere.

4 Hence: 'Thinking? I have found it: it is thinking; this alone cannot be taken away from me. I am, I exist, that is certain' (*Second Meditation*). See Rozemond (2006) both for discussion of how Descartes understands 'thinking' in broad terms, as consciousness or any conscious intellectual activity, and for compelling reasons to think that Descartes did not endorse the transparency thesis.

5 Note that the target of the skeptic here is a token mental state, understood as individuated both by its content and general state type (e.g., a token belief that I am flying).

am *skeptical* about whether I am *skeptical* about whether the external world exists. And so on.

What's the upshot? To be sure, some potentially infinite regresses of psychological attitudes are harmless. Suppose, for whatever reason, that whenever I believe that P, I am thereby committed to believing that I believe that P, and to believing that I believe that I believe that P, and so on. Given world enough and time, or properly dispositional attitudes, all this is stable enough.

Not so for the regress of skepticism.⁶ Let 'A(P)' schematically stand for 'P is assertable by me', and 'S(P)' schematically stand for 'I am skeptical about whether P'. (Here and throughout, 'assertable' means 'warrantedly assertable'.) Next, recall that the distinctive position of the Cartesian skeptic (contrasting with that of the Pyrrhonian skeptic, in particular) is that (upon drawing the moral of a skeptical scenario targeting P) while neither P nor not-P is assertable, the claim that one is skeptical about P *is* assertable (see Klein 2010).⁷ We may then represent the regress as follows:

To start:

A(the external world exists).

At step 1: (after my encounter with the external world skeptic):

A(S(the external world exists)) and
not-A(the external world exists) and
not-A(not-the external world exists)

At step 2: (after my encounter with the mental state skeptic):

A(S(S(the external world exists))) and
not-A(S(the external world exists)) and
not-A(not-S(the external world exists))

At step 3: (after another encounter with the mental state skeptic):

A(S(S(S(the external world exists)))) and
not-A(S(S(the external world exists))) and
not-A(not-S(S(the external world exists)))

And so on . . .

6 Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on the source of instability at issue.

7 The distinction between Cartesian and Pyrrhonian skepticism is often more specifically posed in terms of knowledge or some other 'pro-attitude' required for knowledge (such that, e.g., the Cartesian skeptic maintains, while the Pyrrhonian skeptic denies, that we can know that we cannot know whether the external world exists). In order to remain neutral about what epistemic state is at issue in the meta-level claim, I couch the distinction in terms of the warranted assertability (or not) of skepticism about the object-level claim.

Step 1 entails that a claim initially assertable by me (namely, that the external world exists) is no longer assertable at step 1. Step 2 entails that a claim assertable by me at step 1 (namely, S(the external world exists)) is no longer assertable by me at step 2. Step 3 entails that a claim assertable by me at step 2 (namely, S(S(the external world exists))) is no longer assertable by me at step 3. And so on. At every step, a claim assertable at the previous step is no longer assertable. The regress of skepticism, unlike the regress of belief, invokes an unstable iteration of psychological attitudes, and is therefore vicious.

The regress of skepticism is psychologically vicious – it is rationally confounding – and so it must be stopped. Moreover, as with all regresses, it should be stopped in a principled fashion – we cannot just draw the line at the 39th step. Given that each skeptical iteration is motivated by relevantly the same considerations, there is only one principled stopping place: prior to the very first step. We should deny that the Cartesian scenarios motivate us to be skeptical about whether the external world exists. In turn, we can now deny that relevantly similar Cartesian scenarios motivate us to be skeptical about whether we are skeptical, and so on. We avoid the regress, and as a fringe benefit we get back the external world.⁸

Is this the only way to treat the regress? An alternative strategy might be to first note that, in the limit of skeptical iterations, every skeptical claim constituting the regress becomes unassertable, then to take this result as read.⁹ So, for example, at step 1, after my encounter with the external world skeptic, the claim that I am skeptical about whether the external world exists would not, contrary to previous assumption, be assertable. As such, a mental state skeptic wouldn't be able to target this claim as an appropriate object of further skepticism, and the regress couldn't get started.

This second strategy is problematic, however. To start, the strategy requires rejecting the characteristic feature of Cartesian skepticism – that one *can* warrantably assert that one is skeptical – in favour of the Pyrrhonian view that (putting the point in terms of knowledge) one cannot know whether one can know. Hence even if the strategy were workable, it wouldn't be a defense of *Cartesian* skepticism; it would remain that the regress of skepticism poses a problem for the Cartesian view. Whether there are independent reasons to favour Pyrrhonian skepticism, which more generally maintains that one must remain agnostic about *every* non-evident claim, is beyond the scope of this article. We can say this much,

8 Note that the strategy here applies only to cases of skepticism induced by contemplation of Cartesian scenarios. In cases where one comes to be skeptical about a claim one previously believed as a result either of getting new evidence or of coming to question (on non-Cartesian grounds) the evidence one thought one had, no regress is at issue, and one may maintain one's skeptical stance subject to new evidence, as per usual.

9 Thanks to Benj Hellie for suggesting this strategy.

however: on the face of it, Pyrrhonism is implausibly revisionary, so we should endorse it only if there is good reason to do so. My present point is that the regress of skepticism provides no such good reason: the first strategy is a much better option for treating the regress, in getting back knowledge from the Cartesian skeptic rather than giving more away.

That the first strategy is better than the second indirectly confirms that the former is the best principled response to the Cartesian regress; for there does not appear to be any other principled response to the regress. To be sure, one could simply *ignore* the regress of skepticism and associated psychological instability (or cut it off at some arbitrary finite point), and carry on as usual. But this isn't a response; it's Ostrich dogmatism, a version of the pragmatic response to the Cartesian skeptic. Anyway, even Descartes allowed that 'this process of doubt should not be extended to the whole of life' (*Principles* 3). The philosophically interesting question associated with the Cartesian problematic is whether a principled, not-too-revisionary, and moreover *justifiable* answer to the Cartesian skeptic can be found. Attention to the regress of skepticism shows that we need not settle for either pervasive skepticism or blythe dogmatism: an affirmative answer can be given to the philosophically interesting question.

In closing, it's worth noting how the regress argument against Cartesian skepticism differs from past responses to the skeptic. Descartes's strategy was ad hoc, and other attempts to respond to the Cartesian skeptic effectively presuppose, rather than provide principled reason for, the retention of our ordinary beliefs. The regress argument is different. It *accepts* the skeptical manoeuvre as applied to perceptual belief; then shows, by parallel reasoning, that the manoeuvre leads to a vicious regress, whose only principled and unproblematic resolution requires going back to, and rejecting, the very first skeptical step.¹⁰ Skepticism is thus turned against itself and shown to be an unstable position; we are not only within our rights to but *should* reject this view.¹¹

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10 In accepting the Cartesian's reasoning the regress argument also differs from the standard Pyrrhonian response to the Cartesian ('Academic') skeptic, according to which Academics are really dogmatists, in tacitly assuming that their reasoning is immune to skeptical treatment (see Klein 2010).

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(Existence) Presentism and the A-theory

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1. Introduction

Rasmussen (2012) argues that there is a version of presentism that is not a version of the A-theory. In this article I demonstrate that Rasmussen's argument fails, but that we can establish the same conclusion by other means. I first lay out Rasmussen's argument (§2) and show how it fails (§3). I then (§4) offer a new statement of presentism that is incompatible with the A-theory, which I call 'Existence Presentism', and (§5) clarify Existence Presentism.

2. Rasmussen's argument

Roughly, the A-properties are the properties *being past*, *being present* and *being future*. The B-relations are the relations *being earlier than* and *being later than*. Borrowing from Markosian (2010), Rasmussen claims that A-theorists endorse (A):

(A) Facts about A-properties are not reducible to facts about B-relations (i.e. facts such as *earlier than* or *later than*) and/or B-properties.

Rasmussen's goal is to provide us with a version of presentism – the view that only present objects exist – that doesn't satisfy (A). In outline, Rasmussen thinks that an ersatz presentism – according to which times are abstract objects/maximal propositions – of a similar kind to that defended by