Skepticism and Internalism

John Greco

Abstract: This paper explores a familiar skeptical problematic and considers some strategies for responding to it. Section 1 reconstructs and disambiguates the skeptical problematic, distinguishing between some importantly different lines of skeptical reasoning. Section 2 distinguishes two kinds of anti-skeptical strategy. “Cooperative strategies” accept the conditions on knowledge that are laid down by a target skeptical argument, and argue that those conditions can be satisfied in a relevant domain. “Critical strategies” respond to a skeptical argument by rejecting some condition on knowledge that the argument supposes. It is argued that critical strategies readily present themselves against the skeptical problematic once it is disambiguated as in Section 1. Section 3 looks at an interesting anti-skeptical strategy from Ram Neta and Duncan Pritchard on behalf of John McDowell. Here I argue that, initial appearances to the contrary, no plausible cooperative strategy is available to the internalist.¹

1. A Skeptical Problematic.

A familiar skeptical problematic begins with two seemingly incontrovertible ideas. The first is that knowledge requires proper grounding. Plainly put, if a commitment (or a judgment, or a belief) is to count as knowledge rather than mere opinion, then there must be something that makes this so. The second idea is that one’s grounds must be both appropriately available and appropriately supportive if they are to provide proper grounding. On the one hand, nothing can ground my knowledge unless it is available to me in a way that allows it to play that role. On the other hand, my grounds must be in the right relation to my commitment if they are to play a grounding role for that commitment. Let’s call this relation “support,” so that my commitment (or belief, or judgment) is properly grounded only if it is appropriately supported. Alternatively, my grounds are proper only if they are appropriately supportive.

So far so good. But why think that our commitments are not properly grounded? A first skeptical worry surfaces when we think about what it would take for our grounds to be “appropriately available.” A familiar way to

¹ This is not to say that the McDowellian strategy developed by Neta and Pritchard is not interesting and plausible in its own right. In fact, I think that it is, but that it is best understood as externalist and uncooperative.
understand that notion is in terms of “privileged access” – our grounds must be available to us in some way that is privileged from an epistemic point of view. In the context of skepticism about the external world, this sort of privileged access is usually taken to mean non-empirical access, or access by reflection alone. This reading of “privileged access” makes sense insofar as it is empirical knowledge of the external world that is at issue. The first skeptical worry is that our knowledge of the world is not grounded in reasons that are knowable by reflection alone; i.e. reasons that do not already presuppose empirical knowledge of the external world.

A second skeptical worry surfaces when we think about what it would take for our grounds to be “appropriately supportive.” In some appropriate sense, our grounds ought to guarantee that our commitments (or beliefs, or judgments) are true. We may remain vague at present about what such a guarantee amounts to. In fact, we may at present read “guarantee” as “epistemic guarantee,” or “whatever sort of guarantee that knowledge requires of its grounds.”

What sort of grounds might be knowable by reflection alone and provide the right sort of guarantee? The obvious candidate for something knowable by reflection alone is perceptual appearances. Even if I cannot tell by reflection alone that there is a tree in the yard, I can tell by reflection alone that there appears to me now be a tree in the yard. The problem with perceptual appearances is that they seem not to provide a good guarantee of truth – I could be having just these appearances even when there is no tree. What sort of grounds might provide a good guarantee of truth? Genuine perception would. If I really do see that there is a tree in the yard, then this guarantees that there is a tree in the yard. The problem here is that I can’t tell by reflection alone that my perception is genuine, or that I really do see a tree. The skeptical worry, then, is that no sort of grounds will fit the bill in both the ways required – no sort of grounds will be both appropriately available and appropriately supportive.

Putting these ideas together, we get the following line of skeptical reasoning.

Skeptical Argument
1. All knowledge requires proper grounding.

2. Grounds are proper only if they are both a) appropriately available (knowable by reflection alone), and b) appropriately supportive (provide an appropriate guarantee of truth).

3. Beliefs about the external world are not properly grounded: their grounds are either not appropriately available or not appropriately supportive.
Skepticism and Internalism

Therefore,
4. There is no knowledge of the external world.

Skeptical Argument is ambiguous, however, insofar as the notion of “grounds” is ambiguous. Specifically, epistemologists sometimes use “grounds” to mean epistemic grounds; that is, reasons or evidence that one might give for one’s view, or use to support one’s view in one’s reasoning or inferences. But sometimes epistemologists use “grounds” to mean metaphysical grounds; that is, the basis in reality that makes something so. In this second sense of “grounds,” we might talk instead of a “truth-maker” or “supervenience base.”

Accordingly, we may disambiguate Skeptical Argument so as to distinguish two quite different lines of skeptical reasoning.

Reasons Argument
1. All knowledge requires proper grounding in reasons.

2. Reasons provide proper grounding only if they are both a) knowable by reflection alone, and b) provide an appropriate guarantee of truth.

3. Beliefs about the external world are not so grounded: our reasons for holding such beliefs are either not knowable by reflection alone or do not provide an appropriate guarantee of truth.

Therefore,
4. There is no knowledge of the external world.

Supervenience Argument
1. All knowledge requires proper grounding in reality. There must be something in reality on which knowledge supervenes.

2. A supervenience base provides proper grounding only if it is both a) knowable by reflection alone, and b) provides an appropriate guarantee of truth.

3. Beliefs about the external world are not so grounded: their supervenience base is either not knowable by reflection alone or does not provide an appropriate guarantee of truth.

Therefore,
4. There is no knowledge of the external world.
We will turn to the evaluation of *Reasons Argument* and *Supervenience Argument* in the next section. But first we distinguish two strategies for responding to skeptical arguments in general.

2. Two Anti-skeptical Strategies.

Every skeptical argument contains a) at least one claim about what knowledge in a domain requires, and b) at least one claim to the effect that beliefs in the domain do not satisfy the requirement. Accordingly, we may distinguish two strategies for responding to skeptical arguments. “Cooperative strategies” leave the requirements for knowledge that a skeptical argument lays down unchallenged, and attempt to show that those requirements are in fact satisfied by beliefs in the relevant domain. “Critical strategies” reject the requirements for knowledge laid down by the skeptical argument. In other words, critical strategies deny that knowledge requires what the skeptical argument supposes that it requires.

It is fair to say that internalists in epistemology tend to adopt cooperative strategies against skepticism, whereas externalists tend to adopt critical strategies. That is one reason why externalist responses to skepticism often seem unsatisfying to internalists. The internalist wants to show that we have just what the skeptic denies that we have. The externalist has no such pretensions. On the contrary, the externalist thinks that the skeptic is often specifically right about what we don’t have, but wrong to think that knowledge requires it. In any case, several critical strategies against *Skeptical Argument* readily present themselves, once that argument has been disambiguated.

First consider *Reasons Argument*. Premise 1 of *Reasons Argument* is no longer uncontroversial. If we understand “grounds” to mean reasons or evidence, then the claim that “All knowledge requires proper grounding” is equivalent to the claim that all knowledge must be based on reasons or evidence. But that claim amounts to a kind of evidentialism that many epistemologists would reject. In particular, many versions of foundationalism would reject premise 1 as so understood.

Premise 2 of *Reasons Argument* is plausible in spirit. First, it is plausible that one’s reasons must be available, in some fairly strong sense, to even count as reasons in the first place. Second, it is plausible that one’s reasons must be “supportive” (in some sense guarantee truth) to ground knowledge. For here “supportive” can be read as *evidentially supportive*, and it seems uncontroversial that one’s reasons ought to be supportive (or guarantee truth) in that sense. Premise 2 is not uncontroversial, however, if we understand availability in terms of privileged access, or *knowledge by reflection alone*. For consider, “knowable by reflection alone” here means “knowable by non-empirical means.” But why should
all knowledge require reasons that are available in that way? In particular, why should empirical knowledge require reasons that are available in that way? In effect, premise 2 of Reasons Argument requires that all knowledge, including empirical knowledge, be grounded in non-empirical reasons, or reasons that are knowable by non-empirical means. And that claim is controversial at best.

The premise gains some plausibility, perhaps, with the thought that all knowledge must be grounded ultimately in such reasons. The idea is that empirical knowledge is grounded in empirical reasons to be sure, but these empirical reasons can in turn be traced back to perceptual appearances that are knowable by reflection alone. But here the externalist will object. Perceptual knowledge is plausibly grounded in perceptual abilities, which in turn are not very much like reasoning abilities in either their inputs or their processing. In some reasonable sense of “available,” reasoning takes available propositional contents as inputs, and processes to outputs using available inference rules. Perception, on the contrary, takes phenomenal (and perhaps physical) intensities and patterns as inputs, and proceeds to outputs using sub-personal processing rules. Put simply, neither the inputs nor the processing in perception are “available” in anything like the way that reasons and reasoning proper are available.

In sum, even if reasons proper (i.e. reasons in reasoning and inference) must be available in some fairly strong sense, it is implausible that they must be knowable by reflection alone in order to ground knowledge. It is even less plausible that perceptual knowledge must satisfy any such availability requirement. In any case, externalists will be happy to challenge Reasons Argument on these points.

Next consider Supervenience Argument. Since “grounds” is here understood as supervenience base or “truth-maker,” premise 1 of Supervenience Argument seems unobjectionable. That premise now amounts to no more than a principle of sufficient reason: that if something counts as knowledge, there must be something (some ground in reality) that makes it count as knowledge. Premise 2 of Supervenience Argument is objectionable, however. For why should one think that a supervenience base or truth-maker must be available in the relevant sense? In fact, why must a supervenience base be available in any sense that is even in the neighborhood? When we were understanding “grounds” as reasons or evidence, we had a motivation for thinking that grounds must be available in some fairly strong sense. Namely, it would seem that reasons or evidence cannot function as such – they cannot be my reasons for my belief – unless they are available to me in some appropriate way to use in my reasoning. But why must the metaphysical grounds of knowledge be thus available? Plausibly, the metaphysical grounds of knowledge will include facts about the world and my cognition that are not available to me at all, much less available to me by reflection alone. Once again, many philosophers will be happy to challenge Supervenience Argument on these points.
3. A Cooperative Strategy?

The considerations in Section 2 show that there are plausible critical strategies available against the skeptical problematic that was disambiguated in Section 1. Are there cooperative strategies available? In effect, this is to ask whether one can plausibly reject the third premises of our skeptical arguments. I want to say no. In fact, it seems to me that premise 3 of each argument is true as intended, and that therefore no cooperative strategy against these arguments can be sound. I won’t set out my reasons for thinking so here, since I have done this at length elsewhere. Instead, I want to explore an anti-skeptical strategy suggested by Ram Neta and Duncan Pritchard on behalf of John McDowell. That strategy looks to be both cooperative and internalist at first blush, but I will argue that this is an illusion.

a. McDowell Reconstructed.

A central claim of McDowell’s anti-skeptical strategy is that, contra the traditional view, one can have “reflective access” to facts about the external world. More specifically, McDowell agrees that one’s reasons must be reflectively accessible and must guarantee truth for knowledge, but disagrees that normal empirical perception does not provide just such reasons.

Neta and Pritchard explain:

McDowell allows, for example, that one’s empirical reason for believing a certain external world proposition, $p$, might be that one sees that $p$ is the case. Seeing that is factive, however, in that seeing that $p$ entails $p$. However, McDowell also holds that such factive reasons can be nevertheless reflectively accessible to the agent — indeed, he demands (thought not in quite these words) that they be accessible for they must be able to serve as the agent’s reasons. (p. 384)

---


According to Neta and Pritchard, McDowell’s anti-skeptical strategy is “internalist in at least two senses” (p. 383). More specifically, “For McDowell […] our beliefs are justified (when they are justified) only by virtue of our mental states, and only by virtue of facts that are reflectively accessible to us […]” (p. 383). One might think that McDowell’s strategy is cooperative as well. That is, one might read McDowell as accepting the requirements on knowledge supposed by our skeptical arguments above, and as claiming that those requirements are satisfied by our beliefs about the external world. Hence Neta and Pritchard write,

We suggest that McDowell […] holds the following view: for \( p \) to be able to serve as an agent’s reason for belief, the agent must be able to know that \( p \), and know it by reflection alone. (p. 384)

McDowell’s position […] insists that the agent (at least the knowledgeable agent) be able reflectively to access the factors that make her justified in her beliefs. (p. 386)

The first passage, one might think, has McDowell endorsing premise 2 of \textit{Reasons Argument}. The second passage, one might think, commits him to premise 2 of \textit{Supervenience Argument}. I take it as uncontroversial that McDowell endorses premise 1 of each argument, and so McDowell’s anti-skeptical strategy does look cooperative.

On the face of it, then, we have before us an anti-skeptical strategy that is both internalist and cooperative. In the remainder of the paper I will argue that this is an illusion, however. On closer consideration, McDowell’s anti-skeptical strategy is neither internalist nor cooperative.

\textbf{b. McDowell as Externalist and Uncooperative.}

To see that McDowell’s anti-skeptical strategy is neither internalist nor cooperative, consider the following distinction between strong and weak accessibility.

\( S \) can know that \( p \) by reflection alone (\textit{strong accessibility}) \iff \( S \) can know that \( p \) independently of \textit{antecedent or occurrent} empirical knowledge.

---

5 Neta and Pritchard also claim that “McDowell offers a coherent alternative to standard forms of internalism and also to standard forms of externalism.” (p. 395) I say more about how to understand internalism below.

6 Because McDowell thinks that, at least in cases of knowledge, the same factors that make for justification also make for knowledge.
S can know that \( p \) by reflection alone (\textit{weak accessibility}) \( \text{iff} \) S can know that \( p \) independently of \textit{further} empirical knowledge.

Neta and Pritchard recognize the distinction when they defend McDowell against a McKinsey-style objection.\(^7\) The sort of objection in question targets any combination of content externalism and the thesis that we have privileged access to the contents of our mental states. The idea is that, if such a combination were to hold, it would be possible to gain knowledge of the external world by reflection alone. But this is absurd, and so we have a \textit{reductio} against any view that endorses such a combination. Neta and Pritchard argue that McDowell can rebut this objection.

Notice that the conclusion […] is counterintuitive only if the agent concerned is \textit{acquiring} knowledge of the external world via reflection. If, for example, we could show that the agent could gain her reflective knowledge of her own reasons only provided she already had empirical knowledge of the relevant bit of the external world, then this would disarm the argument above. (p. 390)

In other words, McDowell does hold that one can have knowledge of one’s factive reasons “by reflection alone,” but only in the sense of weak accessibility above. He holds that, once one \textit{already sees that} \( p \), S can know by reflection that one sees that \( p \), and thereby know that \( p \). But such reflection utilizes empirical knowledge that one already has: one knows “by reflection alone” in the weak sense but not in the strong sense above.

But now it is apparent why McDowell’s anti-skeptical strategy is neither internalist nor cooperative: internalism and cooperation require that the grounds for knowledge be strongly accessible, whereas McDowell endorses only weak accessibility. Put differently, \textit{if} McDowell intends that factive reasons are strongly accessible, then his position is implausible for McKinsey-style reasons. But if McDowell means to endorse only weak accessibility for factive reasons, then his anti-skeptical strategy is neither internalist nor cooperative.

Why do cooperation and internalism require strong accessibility? First, a cooperative strategy is one that accepts a target skeptical argument’s conditions for knowledge and tries to show that those conditions can be satisfied. But the skeptical problematic reviewed in Section 1 clearly intends to place strong accessibility requirements on the grounds for knowledge. In the context of that argument, and the worry that one’s grounds do not already presuppose knowledge of the external world, “knowable by reflection alone” clearly means “knowable independently of any empirical knowledge.” The skeptical condi-

tions on knowledge could be easily satisfied, and the worry easily addressed, if “knowable by reflection alone” meant only “knowable independently of further empirical knowledge.” In that case, one could know that there is a tree in the yard simply by remembering that there is a tree in the yard, but certainly no one addressing Skeptical Argument would understand that as a refutation.

What about internalism? Shouldn’t we say that McDowell’s anti-skeptical strategy is “internalist” in some senses but not in others? Internalism is commonly understood as placing a privileged access requirement on the conditions for justification. Disambiguating as in Section 1, we can understand this as either a requirement on one’s reasons proper, or as a requirement on the supervenience base for justification. But either way, internalism arises in the context of debates about the requirements for justification, and weak accessibility requirements simply make no sense in the context of those debates. For consider, internalists want to hold that accessibility requirements are completely general – that all the conditions for justification must be knowable by reflection alone. We cannot make sense of this as a general requirement if “knowable by reflection alone” allows for dependence on antecedent empirical knowledge. For in that case, a question would immediately arise about that antecedent knowledge. Are the justification conditions for that knowledge knowable by reflection alone only in the weak sense? And if so, what is the point of the accessibility requirement in the first place? Who are we disagreeing with?

Another reason for understanding internalism in terms of strong accessibility is the relationship between internalism and skepticism. As was noted above, internalists tend to adopt cooperative strategies against skepticism and tend to be dissatisfied with the critical strategies adopted by externalists. In the context of this three-way debate over the nature and scope of knowledge, it makes sense to see the internalist as endorsing similar accessibility requirements on the conditions for justification as does the skeptic. Again, if the internalist means only to endorse a weak accessibility requirement on justification, why should she be dissatisfied with the typical externalist responses to skepticism? For example, the reliabilist thinks that justification supervenes on empirical facts about the agent’s cognition and her environment. Are these facts “knowable by reflection alone?” Not in the strong sense, but surely in the weak sense.

Finally, what about a third sense of “internalism” that Neta and Pritchard attribute to McDowell: that our beliefs are justified only by virtue of our mental states? We may understand this as a supervenience thesis: roughly, that the facts about one’s mental states are sufficient to entail the facts about one’s justification. Once again, one can stipulate as one likes. But the stipulation will make sense only if it tracks the issues at stake in the contexts where internalisms typically arise. Those contexts, we have seen, involve controversies about the conditions of justification and controversies about the nature
and scope of knowledge. Now if we think that our mental states are strongly accessible, then “mentalism” of the sort now under consideration will indeed track the relevant issues that arise among internalists and externalists about justification and skeptics about knowledge. But if we are content externalists like McDowell, and reject any strong accessibility thesis regarding the contents of our mental states, then mentalism will not track those same issues. On the contrary, and as already argued above, the dialectics among the relevant positions will lose their coherence.

4. Conclusion.

I have argued that a familiar skeptical problematic can be disambiguated so as to distinguish quite different lines of skeptical reasoning. I have also argued that, so disambiguated, the problematic is vulnerable to a number of critical strategies. Finally, I have argued that no plausible cooperative strategy is available against the problematic. In particular, no such internalist strategy is made available by a reconstruction of McDowell.  

John Greco
Saint Louis University
jgreco2@slu.edu

---

8 I would like to thank Ram Neta and Duncan Pritchard for their comments on an earlier draft and for helpful discussions about relevant issues.