Skeptical arguments focus on “bad” scenarios: situations where the world is not as we believe. There are lots and lots of ways for reality to fail to match my beliefs; why have a tiny handful of such “bad” scenarios achieved notoriety? For instance, I believe that I have hands. There are many “bad” scenarios where I don’t, but some are a great deal more troubling than others. Compare a notorious “bad” hypothesis:

**Brain in a Vat (BIV):** I am a recently envatted brain being fed arbitrarily chosen deceptive sensations that mimic perception

with a rather less troubling one:

**Stumps:** everything is more-or-less as I believe it to be, except that there are no hands on the end of my arms

I don’t have hands in either scenario, but only the first scenario is apt to generate a skeptical attack on my justification to believe that I have hands. Why? Roughly, because according to a skeptic armed with Stumps, perception works just fine — so I can trust my faculty of perception to tell me whether or not there are hands on the ends of my arms. BIV doesn’t just say that I don’t have hands, it also gives me reason to doubt that perception — the method I would normally use to check whether I have hands — can be trusted. BIV defeats the method I need to check whether I have hands. Similarly, compare the notorious:

**Non-Uniform World (NUW):** the laws of nature will suddenly change tomorrow

with the tame:

**Gloomy:** everything is more-or-less as I believe it to be, except that the sun won’t rise tomorrow.

If either hypothesis is true, I can’t know that the sun will rise tomorrow. Gloomy will not help to generate a worrying skeptical attack, though.
The reason why not is that it is easy to see how I can know that it doesn’t obtain: easily accessible astronomical data and basic physics allow me to figure out that the sun will, indeed, rise tomorrow. Of course, the same astronomical data and physical laws entail that NUW is false, too. However NUW is more worrying because it entails that precisely the law-based inductive inference that I’d normally use to figure out that the sun will rise tomorrow can’t be trusted. What separates the nasty hypothesis from the tame ones isn’t that they entail the falsity of some of my ordinary beliefs (I have hands, the sun will rise tomorrow). Both nasty and tame hypotheses do that. Rather, what separates the nasty hypotheses is that they also entail that the sort of reasoning I would use to figure out whether the hypotheses themselves are true are untrustworthy across the board.

How should we respond to the notorious skeptical hypotheses? One way is to give in and say that we can’t form justified beliefs that BIV and NUW are false. That concessive response is unappealing, so let’s set it aside for now. Non-concessive lines of response fall into two major camps: the division between the two camps centers on how, exactly, we ought to think of the relation between notorious and tame skeptical hypotheses.

The first camp says we ought to treat the notorious skeptical hypotheses just like the tame ones. How do I know that Stumps is false? I can see that I have hands — so there are hands, not stumps, on the end of my arms. How do I know that BIV is false? I can see that I have hands — so I’m an embodied person, not a brain-in-a-vat. Similarly, I have lots of inductive evidence that the laws of nature won’t suddenly change tomorrow; they’ve always remained constant in the past, after all. Call responses in this camp Moorean, since they recall G.E. Moore’s notorious “proof” of an external world. Moorean responses seem fishy; by relying on the very ways of acquiring justification that the skeptical scenarios call into question, these replies seem unresponsive or question-begging. They appear to ignore the plain fact that the notorious skeptical hypotheses are nastier than the tame ones.

The second non-concessive camp grants skeptics that our normal ways of forming beliefs about our surrounding or about the future won’t cut any ice against the notorious hypotheses. But members of the second camp stop short of saying we have no way at all of forming justified beliefs that notorious skeptical hypotheses are false: they adopt the rationalist position that we can form justified beliefs a priori — that is, beliefs that can be justified without being based on any evidence — that skeptical scenarios such as BIV and NUW are false. Indeed, many rationalists believe that the notorious hypotheses show what we must take for granted in order to be in the business of forming beliefs about the world; we can’t reason our way to the conclusion that they are false because their falsity is a presupposition of reasoning at all.¹

One very common sort of worry about rationalism is that it is mysterious: how could there be the sort of a priori justification that it requires? BIV and NUW are deeply contingent propositions: it is not just that they could have been false, but grasping the semantic values of the terms involved is not sufficient to know whether they are true (in contrast, if we fix the term Julius to refer to the inventor of the zip, “Julius is the inventor of the zip” is shallowly contingent: it could have been false since Julius could have been struck by lightning as a child, but if you know how the reference of Julius was fixed, you can see that the sentence in quotation marks just means “the inventor of the zip is the inventor of the zip”).² Kripke provides examples of shallowly contingent a priori knowledge but no reason to accept deeply contingent a priori knowledge³ — indeed many philosophers who accept a priori justification for beliefs about necessary or shallowly contingent claims will balk at a priori justification for beliefs about deeply contingent

¹. For an eloquent defense of this position, see Wright (1985), (2002), (2004), and (2008) as well as White (2006).
². The origin of the distinction between deep and shallow contingency is Evans (2000).
³. See, of course, Kripke (1980).
claims. Yet the rationalist story requires deeply contingent a priori justification. That sort of justification seems weird: how do we get it? Of course, anyone trying to land this attack will need to make it a lot more precise, but it is hard not to sympathize with the thought that we can’t get justified beliefs in deeply contingent claims for free.

I’d like to focus, instead, on a second worry about rationalism: that it just pushes the skeptical problem back. A clever skeptic wielding BIV or NUW should, if faced with a rationalist reply, just trot out another skeptical hypothesis:

The Very Manipulative Neuroscientist (VMN): I am a recently envatted brain and a neuroscientist is manipulating my faculties of reason in ways that strongly incline me to believe some arbitrarily chosen, false, deeply contingent propositions

By “arbitrarily chosen” here I mean the neuroscientist is using some technique along the lines of formulating propositions using a Ouija board or a big book entitled A Million Random Propositions, choosing handfuls of the deeply contingent false ones (checking, perhaps, for logical consistency) and strongly inclining me to find those propositions true. VMN appears to stand toward a priori reasoning as BIV stands to perception and NUW stands to induction: it defeats the very method of forming beliefs that we’d need to use to show it is false. If NUW is true, then my faculty of a priori reasoning is terribly unreliable. It’s a nasty skeptical hypothesis. If a skeptic can use VMN to remove our a priori justification for deeply contingent propositions then he can use VMN to remove our a priori justification for not-BIV and not-NUW. An inability to respond to a skeptic wielding VMN renders rationalism impotent as an anti-skeptical strategy. What should a rationalist say about how anyone is able to acquire a justified belief in not-VMN? Saying that we can use a priori reasoning to determine that VMN is false looks non-responsive or question-begging in just the same way that using induction to argue that NUW is false or citing perceptual evidence that BIV is false seem non-responsive or question-begging. Rationalism thus seems to lose the big advantage it had over Mooreanism: its promise to refute skepticism without just begging the question against skeptics. Call this claim the Same Boat Hypothesis. The Same Boat Hypothesis creates a dilemma for fans of rationalism as an anti-skeptical strategy. If question-begging replies are no good, then a skeptic armed with VMN wins. If question-begging replies are okay, it’s not clear why we need rationalism in the first place: we should become Mooreans and be done with it. Either way, rationalism fails as an anti-skeptical alternative to Mooreanism: either both strategies fail (so the skeptic wins), or rationalism can defeat skeptics — but so can Mooreanism.

This second worry is far more damning than the first. The first worry doubts that we have the sort of a priori justification that rationalists insist on. The second worry says that even if we grant rationalists all that they ask—a priori justification to believe in the falsity of deeply contingent skeptical hypotheses—it isn’t enough to defeat skeptics without making Moorean inferences. Rationalism, absent Moorean inference, doesn’t work as an anti-skeptical strategy even if it is true. As far as I can tell, this second worry has received no attention in the literature on skepticism.

My aims in this paper are twofold: first, to determine whether rationalism and Mooreanism are in the same boat when it comes to circularity; second, to determine whether that boat is a bad one to be in. My comments so far have been imprecise: if we are going to get straight about whether there is a real problem for rationalism here, we will need to say a lot more about exactly what question-begging means in this context. The next part of this paper will present skeptical challenges centered on BIV, NUW, and VMN more carefully. Part II will pose the question of what, exactly, is viciously circular or question-begging about Moorean responses to skepticism. Parts III, IV, and V will lay out three possible ways to make this charge of

I. Responses to skepticism

How, exactly, is a skeptic supposed to use BIV to threaten our ordinary perceptual knowledge? A common way to present the skeptic’s argument is:

**Premise:** (Simple-1) I do not have justification to believe that not-BIV

**Premise:** (Simple-2) If I do not have justification to believe that not-BIV then I do not have justification to believe that I have hands

**Therefore:** (Simple-3) I do not have justification to believe that I have hands

It is not clear that anyone should lose sleep over this argument. The first premise is itself a skeptical conclusion, and hardly something that most people accept pre-philosophically. So, it looks like we are free to reject it without further ado. Yet without Simple-1, skeptics cannot make any mischief with this style of argument.

Skeptics can do better. A stronger argument in the same neighborhood — one that doesn’t assert that I lack justification to believe that not-BIV by fiat — is available:

**Premise:** (Nasty-1) Either I do not have justification to believe that not-BIV or I do have justification to believe it, but my justification depends (at least in part) on beliefs justified by perception

**Premise:** (Nasty-2) If I have justification to believe any proposition on the basis of perception, then I must have independent (of perception) justification to believe that not-BIV

**So:** (Nasty-3) I do not have justification to believe that not-BIV

I conclude that the dilemma posed above succeeds: rationalism and Mooreanism are in the same boat, so rationalism is not an anti-skeptical alternative to Mooreanism. Does this mean that rationalism is false? Certainly not; it just means that rationalists are in no position to condemn Moorean reasoning as unacceptably circular. This result defeats an influential argument in favor of rationalism — namely, that it’s the only plausible alternative to skepticism — but does not give any affirmative reason to believe that rationalism is false. Indeed, I am not at all sure that anyone (Mooreans included) should reject rationalism entirely. In the final three parts of the paper, I’ll argue that we shouldn’t think of Mooreanism and rationalism as rivals, but rather as compatible — and possibly complementary — theories about different things.

One final note before we take a more careful look at rationalism and Moorean strategies: readers familiar with recent literature on this topic will no doubt be aware of another type of argument for rationalism that is quite separate from dissatisfaction with Mooreanism: some considerations in formal epistemology appear to show that lots of anti-skeptical hypotheses are a priori and this result is believed to greatly strengthen the case for embracing rationalism. I’ll ask readers to set these formal considerations aside for now; I’ll lay them out and say a bit about their relevance (specifically, I will argue that they do support some form of rationalism, but do not give reason to reject Mooreanism) in section VII.
Therefore: (Nasty-4) If I do not have justification to believe that not-BIV then I do not have justification to believe that I have hands

Therefore: (Nasty-5) I do not have justification to believe that I have hands

The third step of this argument follows from the first two because Nasty-1 says that any justification I have to believe that not-BIV depends upon perception, while Nasty-2 says that justification to believe anything on the basis of perception requires perception-independent justification to believe that not-BIV. More simply, Nasty-1 says that justification to believe that not-BIV could only come from perception, while Nasty-2 says that justification to believe that not-BIV cannot come from perception. Nasty-3 follows because there is nowhere left for justification for not-BIV to come from.  

It’s worth saying a bit about the notion of dependence that figures in this argument. What I have in mind here is not a kind of psychological dependence — this argument does not turn on a claim about the psychological process wherein someone forms a belief that not-BIV — but rather on rational dependence. A belief that p rationally depends on perception just in case were I to learn that my faculties of perception were totally unreliable, I would lose my justification to believe that p.

The situation regarding inductive skepticism is analogous. Consider a familiar sort of argument:

Premise: (Simple Induction-1) I do not have justification to believe not-NUW

Premise: (Simple Induction-2) If I do not have justification to believe that not-NUW then I do not have justification to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow

Therefore: (Simple Induction-3) I do not have justification to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow

Non-skeptics can comfortably deny Simple Induction-1, so this argument isn’t very powerful. The more worrying argument is:

Premise: (Nasty Induction-1) Either I do not have justification to believe that not-NUW or I do have justification to believe it, but my justification depends (at least in part) on beliefs justified by induction

Premise: (Nasty Induction-2) If I have justification to believe any proposition about the future on the basis of induction, then I must have independent (of induction) justification to believe that not-NUW

So: (Nasty Induction-3) I do not have justification to believe that not-NUW

Premise: (Nasty Induction-4) If I do not have justification to believe that not-NUW then I do not have justification to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow.

Therefore: (Nasty Induction-5) I do not have justification to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow

Where, again, the relevant dependence is rational dependence. There is no premise here that non-skeptics can flatly reject, so once again the nasty argument is far more effective than its simple counterpart.

How might we resist Nasty 1–5 and Nasty-Induction 1–5? Each argument has three premises, and thus three possible loci of resistance. One way out is to deny the fourth step of each argument, and say e.g. that I do not have justification to believe that not-BIV but do have justification to believe that I have hands. The trouble here is that brains in vats don’t have hands, so I have hands entails not-BIV. Thus this

strategy involves denying closure — the thesis that if someone has a justified belief that p, and a justified belief that p entails q, and he forms a belief that q based on p, then his belief that q must be justified — since if closure were true, anyone with justification to believe that he has hands would have justification to believe not-BIV. Denying closure is a radical move indeed, so from now on I’ll proceed on the assumption that closure is true.7

A second locus of resistance is the first premise of each argument, which says that if I have justification to believe not-BIV, that justification depends upon perceptual beliefs, and if I have justification to believe not-NUW, that justification depends upon inductive beliefs. These premises do not say that the justification in question must come from perception or induction alone; rather, they claim that knowledge of my surroundings must depend, at one stage or another, on beliefs justified by perception and that knowledge of the future must depend, at one stage or another, on beliefs justified by induction. Even so, rationalists deny both of these premises since they insist that we have a priori justification for not-BIV and not-NUW — and this a priori justification in no way depends upon perceptual or inductive beliefs. So, rationalists can resist the first premise of each argument, but everyone else looks stuck with it. 8

6. Whether denying the fourth premise of a nasty skeptical argument involves denying closure depends upon precisely how we formulate our skeptical hypothesis and the ordinary belief. BIV entails that I don’t have hands; I am being deceived by an evil demon does not. The sun will rise tomorrow does not entail not-NUW; the sun will rise tomorrow because of the gravitational force exerted by the sun on the Earth keeps the Earth in a regular orbit and the Earth rotates on its axis does entail not-NUW.

These complexities do not matter much for our purposes, though. Skeptics can formulate their skeptical hypotheses so that they entail the negation of some things we ordinarily take ourselves to know so denying the fourth premises of these arguments won’t fly as an anti-skeptical strategy if closure is correct.

7. An adequate defense of closure would take us far afield. For an argument for closure, see Hawthorne (2003).


The final locus of resistance is the second premise of each nasty argument: the claim that using perception to acquire justification requires independent (of perception) justification to believe not-BIV, and using induction to acquire justification requires independent (of induction) justification to believe not-NUW. This premise says you cannot acquire justification to believe anything on the basis of perception unless you have justification to believe not-BIV — that much follows from closure — and that, moreover, you cannot acquire justification to believe not-BIV for the first time by using perception. That is, you cannot reason here is a hand (I perceive as much) therefore not-BIV; Nasty Induction-2 rules out the analogous inductive case for not-NUW.

The second premise of each argument, then, rules out the sort of circularity involved in Moorean reasoning.

We can now state our worry about rationalism more carefully. Suppose a rationalist rejects Mooreanism — and thus embraces Nasty-2 and Nasty Induction-2 — and also embraces closure, and thus embraces Nasty-4 and Nasty Induction-4. That rationalist looks ill-positioned to respond to:

Premise: (Manipulative-1) Either I do not have justification to believe that not-VMN or I do have justification to believe it, but my justification is depends (at least in part) on beliefs justified by perception or I do have justification to believe it, but my justification comes from a priori reasoning

Premise: (Manipulative-2a) If I have justification to believe any proposition on the basis of perception, then I must have independent (of perception) justification to believe that not-VMN

Premise: (Manipulative-2b): If I have justification to believe anything on the basis of a priori reasoning, then I must have independent (of a priori reasoning) justification to believe that not-VMN
So: (Manipulative-3) I do not have justification to believe that not-VMN

Premise: (Manipulative-4) If I do not have justification to believe that not-VMN then I do not have justification to believe that I have hands

Therefore: (Manipulative-5) I do not have justification to believe that I have hands

Rationalism gives no grounds to reject the first premise and rationalist anti-Mooreans are committed to Manipulative-2a (it’s hard to see any grounds for rejecting that premise while accepting Nasty-2; both say I can’t determine that perception is trustworthy without perception-independent justification to believe that I’m not a recently envatted brain). Moreover, Manipulative-2b looks as solid as the second premises in the other nasty arguments: it says I cannot form justified beliefs using some belief-forming method unless I have justification (independent of that method) for believing that some skeptical scenario that renders that method untrustworthy doesn’t obtain. So, rationalists face a problem here. The only way out is to treat Manipulative-2b as different from all of the other second premises: that is, to say that while the Moorean response to BIV and the inductive response to NUW are viciously circular, using a priori reasoning to defeat VMN is acceptably circular. The Same Boat Hypothesis alleges the opposite, namely that any grounds for rejecting Manipulative-2b will also be grounds for rejecting Nasty-2 and Nasty Induction-2.

Some rationalists may question the first premises by insisting that justification to believe not-VMN is had by default and thus does not depend on anything, including a priori reasoning. If default justification is justification that does not require one to have gone through any psychological process of reasoning, then the claim that not-VMN has default justification doesn’t matter much for our purposes. Nothing in Manipulative 1–5 turns on the process whereby anyone comes to believe not-VMN: the argument turns instead on claims about rational dependence. However, if default justification means justification that cannot be undercut—that is, justification such that there is no claim U such that, were I to learn U, my justification would diminish—then justification to believe not-VMN cannot be default. Imagine I came to know that I had been brainwashed: some nefarious experimental philosophers, as part of their research, deliberately and extensively tampered with my faculties of reasoning (including my armchair reasoning, i.e., reasoning not based on evidence). Learning that really ought to diminish my confidence in putative a priori claims, including (if I believe it to be a priori) not-VMN. So, not-VMN cannot be default in the second, stronger sense: justification to believe it requires a shakable trust in my faculties of a priori reasoning. So, insisting on default justification won’t derail the first premise in any significant way.

Getting straight on whether rationalists can reject Manipulative-2b without rejecting all of the other second premises, though, will require a closer examination of just what the anti-circularity constraint involves. So far, we’ve just gestured roughly at some constraint that rules out Moorean inferences such as justifying not-BIV by using perceptual beliefs. We’re going to need to pin this constraint down precisely before we can figure out whether it makes trouble for rationalists faced with VMN as well.

II. Why not be a Moorean?

What is wrong with Moorean reasoning? So far we have gestured in the direction of a problem by saying that Moorean reasoning is circular or question-begging, but this is far too imprecise. Consider:

Enabling condition:9 (Moore-1) [an experience as of a hand]

9. I say ‘enabling condition’ rather than ‘premise’ since having some perceptual experience cannot itself be a premise in an argument (though, of course, the proposition I am having a perceptual experience as of a hand could be). By enabling condition, I simply mean a state that licenses the formation of another belief, here via the use of perception.
So: (Moore-2) I have a hand

Therefore: (Moore-3) not-BIV

Premise: (Moorean Induction-1) In the past, observed regularities have tended to continue into the future

So: (Moorean Induction-2) From now on, observed regularities will tend to continue into the future

Therefore: (Moorean Induction-3) not-NUW

Moorean reasoning does not beg the question in the typical sense of being tautological: the conclusions of Moorean reasoning are not among the premises. So, circularity in that sense cannot be what is wrong with these bits of reasoning. None of this is to deny that these pieces of reasoning seem fishy, but what, exactly, is wrong with them?

There are a few other bad diagnoses. A first bad diagnosis is to deny the first step of each argument, i.e. to say that in the past observed regularities have not tended to continue into the future, or to say that nobody ever does have a perceptual experience as of a hand. That reply lacks any plausibility. A second bad reply is to deny that any of us ever has justification to believe the second step of each argument on the basis of the first. But that’s an awfully drastic measure: we’d like a diagnosis of these arguments that does not commit us to wholesale skepticism about perceptual beliefs. Third, we could deny that anyone can acquire justification to believe the conclusion via inference from the second step. However, in each case the second step deductively entails the conclusion, so this move requires denying closure; that, too, is an unappealing option. Can’t we do better?

Yes—in the next three sections I will look at three accounts that have some go in them. All three of these accounts will allege that Moore 1–3 and Moorean Induction 1–3 are counterexamples to transmission: the thesis that if you have justification to believe the premises of a bit of reasoning (or, are in fact in the enabling conditions for that bit of reasoning) and the premises or enabling conditions entail the conclusion, you can acquire additional justification to believe the conclusion by going through the bit of reasoning. That is, the diagnosis will say that someone cannot acquire additional justification — or, justification for the first time — to believe not-BIV by going through Moore 1–3, nor can someone acquire justification to believe not-NUW by going through Moorean Induction 1–3. These bits of reasoning exhibit transmission failure.

If the Same Boat Hypothesis is false, two things need to be true. First, there must be some plausible constraint on reasoning that entails Nasty-2 and Nasty Induction-2; in order to do this, it must entail that Moore 1–3 and Moorean Induction 1–3 cannot possibly give one justification to believe their conclusions. That is, we need a story about why Moore 1–3 and Moorean Induction 1–3 exhibit transmission failure. Second, this constraint on reasoning must not entail Manipulative-2b, on pain of defeating both Mooreanism and rationalism as anti-skeptical strategies. Obviously this second task is easy if we allow rationalists to put some ad hoc provisos in the relevant diagnosis; most egregiously, we can always attach a rider “…except when the skeptical scenario is VMN” to our constraint and get rationalism out of trouble. The challenge is rather to motivate a constraint wherein there is a plausible, non-ad hoc story about why Moorean reasoning is circular and rationalist responses to VMN are not that entails Nasty-2 and Nasty Induction-2 but not Manipulative-2a.

III. First diagnosis: insensitivity

The first diagnosis begins with a simple observation: were BIV true, I would still have experiences as of hands. Similarly, were NUW true, induction would still have a good track record. Thus I could go through Moore 1–3 or Moorean Induction 1–3 even in “bad” worlds where skeptical hypotheses hold. This seems to make Moore 1–3 and Moorean Induction 1–3 suspect at best. After all, we wouldn’t trust a
2. Our beliefs in the negations of notorious skeptical hypotheses such as BIV and NUW are known to be insensitive. In contrast, our beliefs in the negations of tame skeptical hypotheses, not-Stumps and not-Gloomy, are sensitive. If I had stumps on the end of my arms, I’d see that I didn’t have hands; if astronomical laws gave reasons to think the sun wouldn’t rise tomorrow, it’d be all over the news.

3. There are entailment relations between ordinary propositions and skeptical hypotheses. For instance, if I have hands then not-BIV. Sensitivity is not closed under entailment: p can entail q, where p is sensitive, and yet q is insensitive.

These three features create a puzzle: most of us want to accept closure, yet most of us (initially, anyway) find something like the sensitivity constraint on justification plausible. It’s hard to know how to resolve this tension.

This puzzle accounts for a lot of our schizophrenia about skeptical arguments. Mooreans resolve this tension one way: our (sensitive) ordinary beliefs are justified, and our ordinary beliefs entail the falsity of skeptical hypotheses, so by closure we can form justified beliefs in the falsity of skeptical hypotheses. Skeptics resolve it the other way: our (obviously insensitive) beliefs in the falsity of skeptical hypotheses are unjustified, yet our ordinary beliefs entail the falsity of those skeptical hypotheses, so by closure our ordinary beliefs must not be justified. A third way to resolve this tension is, of course, to keep the sensitivity constraint and just give up closure: this allows maintaining both that our ordinary beliefs are justified and that our beliefs in the negations of skeptical hypotheses are not.

As an account of our intuitions about skeptical arguments, the insensitivity diagnosis has a lot going for it. However, fans of the Same

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10. Nozick (1981) defends the sensitivity account of knowledge and adopts this third strategy (adapted to focus on knowledge, rather than justification): that is, he denies closure and thus claims that he knows that he has hands but does not know that not-BIV.
Boat Hypothesis cannot embrace the insensitivity diagnosis of what’s wrong with Mooreanism for two reasons. First, it requires the sensitivity constraint on justification, yet as we have seen that account is hard to square with closure. Giving up closure is a very high price to pay. Second, though, the insensitivity diagnosis won’t give us what we are after: a position that rejects the Same Boat Hypothesis. According to the insensitivity diagnosis, the rationalist response to VMN is circular in just the same way as Moorean reasoning. Belief in not-VMN is insensitive, so the insensitivity diagnosis condemns any reasoning that alleges to lead to a justified belief in VMN. Put another way, since a priori reasoning to not-VMN has no insensitive premises but an insensitive conclusion, the insensitivity diagnosis must condemn it as bad reasoning. Thus, fans of the insensitivity diagnosis are committed to Manipulative-2b. The insensitivity diagnosis does not pick out a kind of circularity involved in Moorean arguments that does not also appear in the rationalist reply to VMN. Our first attempt has failed.

IV. Second diagnosis: a dialectical constraint

Most people are inclined to say that Moorean reasoning “begs the question” against skeptics, though as we have seen Moorean arguments, unlike other “question-begging” arguments, aren’t tautological. However, etymologically “begging the question” has nothing to do with tautologies — rather, it refers to arguing in a way that just asks (i.e., begs) one’s opponent to grant one’s conclusion, rather than earning the conclusion. It is thus a dialectical no-no: a question-begging argument should not move someone who disagrees with you, and is thus unwilling to just grant your conclusion. A second diagnosis of Moorean reasoning is that it commits just this sort of dialectical foul. A little more carefully, we might embrace:

No Question-Begging: A belief that p is justified only if it rests upon reasoning that would have some dialectical weight against someone who believes that ~p.

Where an argument has dialectical weight against someone if and only if it provides him with some reason to believe its conclusion. It is easy enough to see why No Question-Begging makes trouble for Moorean reasoning. Moore 1–3 has no dialectical weight against someone who believes BIV: he’ll deny, with perfect internal consistency, that Moore-1 provides any support for Moore-2. Similarly, Moorean Induction 1–3 has no dialectical weight against someone who believes NUW. Call this account of the problem with Moorean reasoning the dialectical inefficacy diagnosis.

The dialectical inefficacy diagnosis is not new. Jim Pryor cites it as the reason why Moorean reasoning seems to be bad reasoning. Pryor grants that Moorean reasoning is dialectically ineffective, and thinks that we all feel some intuitive pull towards No Question-Begging. However, he thinks No Question-Begging is false: it relies on a conflation between the task of defending a position against a skeptic and justifying your beliefs to yourself. Thus, No Question-Begging can explain the sociological datum that a lot of people are uneasy with Moorean reasoning but cannot give a successful account wherein Moorean reasoning does not lend justification to its conclusions. Of course, just pointing out that defending a belief against a skeptic and justifying it to oneself are different tasks is not enough to defeat No Question-Begging, since it is plausible that the criteria for success in those two tasks cannot come very far apart. A natural way to think of justifying a belief is to defend it against a possible skeptic in an imaginary dialogue. If that’s right, No Question-Begging does not rely on sloppy conflation, but rather an appealing view wherein justification to oneself and dialectical efficacy against others cannot come apart. We cannot write the dialectical inefficacy diagnosis off without a fight.

So the good news for rationalist anti-Mooreans is that the dialectical inefficacy diagnosis does indeed condemn Moorean arguments and has quite a bit of initial plausibility. The bad news, though, is that it also spells trouble for rationalism. The reason why is clear enough:

nothing a rationalist can say will have any dialectical force against someone convinced of VMN. In particular, any claim that not-VMN is a priori will lack dialectical force. So, the dialectical inefficacy account entails Manipulative-2b, and thus that Manipulative 1–5 is a sound argument. The dialectical inefficacy diagnosis entails the Same Boat Hypothesis.

This leaves us with a puzzle: the dialectical inefficacy diagnosis is extremely plausible, but it rules out all anti-skeptical strategies. We’d better have a good reason for rejecting it. One such reason is obvious: given a choice between accepting No Question-Begging and skepticism, and rejecting No Question-Begging and skepticism, the latter certainly seems the more appealing package. While that reason may be convincing, it isn’t very enlightening: the case for No Question-Begging seemed plausible enough, and it is natural to wonder where it went wrong. We need a plausible story about why the dialectical inefficacy diagnosis is false.

Fortunately, we can get one. No Question-Begging models justification on argument against an opposing position, but skeptics of the sort who push BIV, NUW, or VMN aren’t really defending a position—at least, not if No Question-Begging is correct. Skeptics do not produce evidence or argument for BIV, NUW, or VMN. No skeptic has any credible evidence that any of these bad scenarios hold. That’s familiar enough: skeptical arguments do not proceed by providing reasons to believe skeptical hypotheses; they proceed by saying, first, that we lack conclusive grounds for believing the negation of skeptical hypotheses and, second, that we therefore ought to be agnostic about them. The problem is that if No Question-Begging is true, and skeptics have no dialectically effective arguments in support of BIV, NUW, or VMN, then skeptics necessarily lack justification to believe those claims. A skeptic who embraces BIV, NUW, or VMN is thus thereby unreasonable if No Question-Begging is true: his belief lacks justification. So, if we imagine ourselves in an argument against such a skeptic, we ought to be able to shake him from his position just by mentioning No Question-Begging! If No Question-Begging is right, reasonable skeptics embracing BIV, NUW, or VMN cannot exist.

This last point is important because if we are arguing with a skeptic who believes BIV, NUW, or VMN then we can, by invoking No Question-Begging, get him to be agnostic about his favored skeptical hypothesis. The question of whether, say, Moore 1–3 is good reasoning then becomes, according to No Question-Begging: should Moore 1–3 make someone who is agnostic about BIV have justification to believe not-BIV? But that’s just the same as our original question, namely: is Moore 1–3 good reasoning? No Question-Begging thus gets us no closer to figuring out whether Moore 1–3 is good reasoning. We can only make sense of dialectical weight in the context of argument against someone with an internally consistent position—yet if No Question-Begging is true then nobody with an internally consistent position can believe BIV, NUW, or VMN. Once we’ve dislodged our dialectical opponent from his belief in BIV, NUW, or VMN can we then go on to give a Moorean argument? That’s the question we’ve been worried about throughout, but No Question-Begging doesn’t look well-positioned to answer it. So, the dialectical inefficacy diagnosis fails to tell us what is wrong with Moore 1–3 or Moorean Induction 1–3. All it tells us is something we already knew: if there is a story about why those bits of reasoning are no good, then those bits of reasoning are no good. The charge of dialectical inefficacy adds nothing.

12. This character—the fellow convinced of VMN—is not a familiar one in the philosophical bestiary. However, he needn’t be very different from the more familiar (from the epistemology literature, anyway!) character who believes BIV. The believer in VMN simply adds that it may seem as if it is a priori that not-BIV, but that this rational appearance cannot be trusted since, like perceptive appearances, it is the result of a deception.

13. Of course, it’s possible that the skeptic with whom we are arguing does not accept No Question-Begging. Maybe, then, it is not unreasonable for him to hold not-BIV. However, the point remains that we can condemn Moorean reasoning using No Question-Begging only if we apply that constraint to ourselves but not to our skeptical opponent—and I just can’t see any motivation for this double standard.
V. Third diagnosis: conservatism

Let’s set skepticism aside, for a moment, and consider some bad arguments about everyday matters:

**Premise:** (Table-1) This table looks red

**So:** (Table-2) This table is red

**Therefore:** (Table-3) This is not a white table under red lights

**Premise:** (Election-1) Someone just checked a box on a piece of paper and slid it into a slot

**So:** (Election-2) Someone just voted

**Therefore:** (Election-3) This is not just a rehearsal of an election

These look like terrible bits of reasoning. It should not be so easy to acquire justified beliefs in Table-3 or Election-3; if these arguments are not epistemically useless they generate odious “easy justification” for their conclusions.14 Yet, as before, it can be tricky to say what is wrong with each bit of reasoning; neither is tautological, and each step looks individually unobjectionable. A plausible diagnosis is that the premise of each argument gives reason to believe the second step only on the assumption that the conclusion is true. That the table looks red gives you reason to believe that it is red only on the assumption that the lights aren’t red; that someone put some paper in a ballot box gives you reason to believe that someone voted only on the assumption that there is an election going on. A little more carefully, the negation of the conclusion of each argument is an underminer for the support lent by the first step to the second: a claim that, were you to learn it, would remove whatever rational force the first premise lends to the second step of each argument. Do you have justification to assume the conclusion of each argument? Maybe yes, maybe no: if you’re in Ikea, it’s a safe bet that the lights are white, but if you’re in a fun house then all bets are off. So, if you’re in Ikea, you can reasonably go through the reasoning of Table 1–3, but if you’re in a fun house you may not. Either way, you can rationally go through the steps of Table 1–3 only if you already have justification to believe Table-3; similarly, you can only rationally go through the steps of Election 1–3 if you already have justification to believe Election-3. So, while these arguments aren’t tautological, they are epistemically useless in just the same way that tautological arguments are. Nobody can use them to acquire justification to believe anything new.

We can generalize this account of the problem with Table 1–3 and Election 1–3. Our diagnosis rested, implicitly, on a principle called conservatism: the claim that someone can acquire a justified belief that p on the basis of some grounds G only if he has antecedent justification to believe that all hypotheses that undermine the support lent by that consideration to p are false. Conservatism says that someone has justification to believe Table-2 on the basis of Table-1 only if he already has justification to believe Table-3 (ditto for Election 1–3). If conservatism is true, Moore 1–3 and Moorean Induction 1–3 are epistemically useless for just the same reason that Table 1–3 and Election 1–3 are. A perceptual experience as of a hand gives me reason to believe I have a hand only if I may reasonably assume that not-BIV; induction having a good track record gives me reason to believe that induction will continue to be reliable only if I may reasonably assume not-NUW. This diagnosis is appealing not only because conservatism looks compelling on its own, but because it seems to offer the right diagnosis of humdrum bad reasoning like Table 1–3 and Election 1–3. Call this the conservative diagnosis.

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14. Cohen (2002) and Wright (2008) offer versions of this worry about Moorean reasoning; Cohen discusses easy knowledge rather than easy justification, but the basic shape of the worry is the same.
Does conservatism make the world safe for anti-Moorean rationalists: that is, does it entail Nasty-2, Nasty Induction-2, and Manipulative-2a, but not entail Manipulative-2b?

The answer isn’t obvious. Conservatism says I can form justified beliefs using perception only if I have antecedent justification to believe not-BIV and that I can form justified beliefs using induction only if I have antecedent justification to believe not-NUW. Does it also say I can form justified beliefs using a priori reasoning only if I have antecedent justification to believe not-VMN? If so, is there any reason to think that it doesn’t entail Manipulative-2b? I can think of two possible reasons to think that conservatism doesn’t entail the Same Boat Hypothesis:

1. **Restrict our notion of undermining.** Perhaps evidential support can be undermined, but a priori rational support cannot. If we understand the term “underminer” narrowly to mean a defeater that removes the support lent by some evidence to p, conservatism is silent on whether someone needs antecedent justification to believe not-VMN to form justified a priori beliefs.

2. **Restrict our notion of justification to believe.** We can distinguish stronger and weaker notions of justification to believe. On a robust understanding someone has justification to believe that p only if there is a sound, undefeated deliberative route from his evidence concluding in a doxastically justified belief that p. On that robust understanding, conservatism entails Manipulative-2b: it says someone can form justified beliefs on the basis of a priori reasoning only if he already has an undefeated sound deliberative route concluding in a justified belief that not-VMN. On a more anemic understanding, justification to believe that p only requires adequate evidence that p. Since we’re granting rationalists that we don’t need any evidence to believe not-VMN, we’ve all got adequate evidence to believe that not-VMN and this in no way depends on any evidence or reasoning. If conservatism is a claim about justification in the anemic sense — that is, if conservatism says you need adequate evidential support for ~U (where U is an underminer), but do not need to be able to reason your way to the conclusion that ~U, in order to form a justified belief that p on the basis of some grounds G — then conservatism does not entail Manipulative-2b.

So, there are potentially two ways out for rationalist conservatives. In the remainder of this section, I’ll argue that the first is no good but the second is tenable — and, indeed, advisable for reasons having nothing to do with the Same Boat Hypothesis.

About strategy (1): restricting our notion of undermining allows far too much to count as good reasoning. It’s often possible to use broadly Moorean patterns of reasoning in a priori contexts so if we restrict conservatism to the narrow conception of undermining then it won’t tell us what’s wrong with a priori forms of Mooreanism. Consider these conditional proofs:

**Assumption for conditional proof:** *(A priori Election-1)* Someone just checked a box on a piece of paper and slid it into a slot

**So:** *(A priori Election-2)* Someone just voted

**So:** *(A priori Election-3)* An election is happening, rather than a rehearsal

**Therefore:** *(A priori Election-4)* If someone just checked a box on a piece of paper and slid it into a slot, then an election is happening, rather than a rehearsal
Assumption for conditional proof: (A priori Moorean Induction-1) In the past, observed regularities have tended to continue into the future

So: (A priori Moorean Induction-2) From now on, observed regularities will tend to continue into the future

So: (A priori Moorean Induction-3): not-NUW

Therefore: (A priori Moorean Induction-4) If in the past, observed regularities have tended to continue into the future, then not-NUW

These bits of reasoning don't look any better than their a posteriori counterparts, so it's hard to see the appeal of an understanding of conservatism that condemns the a posteriori versions of these arguments while remaining silent on the a priori ones. Worse still, we get the result that someone cannot form a justified belief in not-NUW via Moorean Induction 1–3, but can form a justified belief in not-NUW by reasoning through A priori Moorean Induction 1–4, then noting that observed regularities have held in the past, and then concluding that not-NUW. Will it help to say that, though these bits of reasoning are a priori, the proposition in the assumption is still, in some sense, evidence for the second step? Not really, because we can just tweak the argument further:

Assumption for conditional proof: (Rational Moorean Induction-1) In the past, observed regularities have tended to continue into the future

So: (Rational Moorean Induction-2) It is rational to believe that, from now on, observed regularities will tend to continue into the future

So: (Rational Moorean Induction-3): It is rational to believe that not-NUW

Therefore: (Rational Moorean Induction-3) If in the past, observed regularities have tended to continue into the future, then it is rational to believe that not-NUW

Here the assumption supports the second step, but it really can't be described as evidence for it. While the conclusion of this argument is different from the ones above — it will only allow us to derive a claim about rational belief — it is enough to keep skepticism at bay. So, restricting our notion of undermining won't really block Moorean responses to skepticism; it only requires tweaking them slightly so that they involve conditional proofs. The first way out is no good.

What about the second — weakening our notion of antecedent justification to believe so that acquiring a justified belief that p on the basis of G doesn't require being able to rationally conclude that underminers for the support lent by G to p are false? It turns out that, quite apart from considerations about VMN, conservatives ought to adopt the anemic notion of justification to believe. If we plug the robust version of justification back into conservatism, it delivers implausible results in everyday cases. Consider:

The Seasoned Interviewer: Sasha has interviewed many criminal suspects for the police, and she is very good at her job. After much practice and study, she is excellent at telling truth from lies and she knows it. One day a colleague asks Sasha if a suspect who frequently touches his nose during an interview is more likely to be lying. Sasha replies, truthfully, that she isn't sure; she finds it very hard
to articulate such rules in the abstract since her previous attempts to do so have been unsuccessful. Shortly thereafter, Sasha interviews a suspect who frequently touches his nose. Sasha acquires a justified belief that the suspect is lying, and her belief is based, in large part, on his frequent nose-touching.

This sort of example shows that it is possible to form a justified belief in p on the basis of G while having evidence inconsistent with being able to form a justified belief in the falsity of an underminer for the support lent by G to p. The reason Sasha cannot form a justified belief that the underminer is false isn’t that she lacks evidence for the anti- underminer; rather, she has evidence that she cannot reason her way towards a justified belief in it.\textsuperscript{16} Yet anemic conservatism isn’t hopelessly weak: it will show what is wrong with Table 1–3 and Election 1–3, on the assumption that there’s no impediment to directly figuring out whether there’s a rehearsal going on or what color the lights are.

All of this looks like good news for conservative rationalists: anemic conservatism won’t entail Manipulative-2b, so it won’t make it impossible to respond to a skeptic armed with VMN. And anemic conservatism is plausible: it shows what’s wrong with some obviously bad arguments. One question remains: will it block Moore 1–3 and Moorean Induction 1–3?

VI. Anemic conservatism and the Same Boat Hypothesis

Anemic conservatism doesn’t threaten to leave rationalists unable to respond to a skeptic armed with VMN. However, adopting anemic conservatism only yields a way out of the Same Boat Hypothesis if anemic conservatism is inconsistent with Mooreanism. The problem is: it’s not. Anemic Conservatism is consistent with Moorean reasoning sometimes being good reasoning. The problem cases arise when someone is in a position where (for some ordinary claim p based on grounds G where U undermines the support lent by G to p):

(a) He has p-independent justification to believe that \( \neg U \) in the anemic sense

(b) There is no p-independent sound reasoning from his evidence which concludes in a doxastically justified belief that \( \neg U \); that is, he lacks p-independent justification to believe that \( \neg U \) in the robust sense.

(c) He can form a doxastically justified belief that \( \neg U \) via reasoning from p, perhaps along with other premises. That is, he can have p-dependent justification to believe \( \neg U \) in the robust sense.

If someone is in this position, prior to acquiring G there is no way for anyone with his evidence to form a doxastically justified belief that \( \neg U \) (that’s condition (b)). However, when he acquires evidence G, he can form a justified belief that p (that follows from (a) and Anemic Conservatism). He can then form a doxastically justified belief that \( \neg U \) via inference from p (that’s condition (c)). But that’s just Moorean reasoning. As a concrete example, consider:

The Seasoned Interviewer Redux: As before, Sasha is an excellent and experienced police interviewer. Also as before, Sasha sincerely pleads agnosticism when a colleague asks her if a suspect who frequently touches his nose during an interview is more likely to be lying — she finds it hard to reason about such rules in the abstract and has a poor track record when doing so. Shortly thereafter, Sasha interviews a suspect who frequently touches his nose. Sasha forms a justified belief that the suspect his lying and this belief is based, in large part, on his frequent nose-touching. After the interview, Sasha remembers her colleague’s question.
She realizes that nose-touching seemed to her a clear sign that the subject was lying. She concludes that frequent nose-touching is a sign of dishonesty after all.

Sasha has engaged in some Moorean reasoning here. According to anemic conservatism, Sasha's reasoning is kosher. Here is why:

(a') Prior to conducting her interview with the nose-touching suspect, Sasha has adequate evidence to believe that frequent nose-touching is a sign of dishonesty, so — according to anemic conservatism — there is no obstacle to Sasha acquiring a justified belief that the suspect is lying based on his frequent nose-touching.

(b') Prior to conducting her interview, there is no sound, undefeated bit of reasoning from Sasha's evidence to the conclusion frequent nose-touching is a sign of dishonesty — all such routes are defeated by Sasha's evidence that she is no good at reasoning about such rules in the abstract.

(c') Sasha can form a doxastically justified belief in frequent nose-touching is a sign of dishonesty via reasoning from the suspect is lying and the knowledge that her belief that the suspect is lying is based upon his frequent nose-touching.

So, prior to conducting the interview, Sasha is rationally agnostic about frequent nose-touching is a sign of dishonesty. But, once she does conduct the interview, she can form a justified belief that the suspect is lying, and then a justified belief in frequent nose-touching is a sign of dishonesty. There is nothing wrong with this Moorean pattern of reasoning — at least, not according to anemic conservatism. The reason why this Moorean reasoning is kosher is that impediments to reasoning one's way to a justified belief in a proposition can be fine-grained: they block certain routes rather than others. Here, Sasha has evidence that she's no good at formulating rules for evaluating testimony in the abstract, but no evidence that she can't derive such rules from concrete cases. That's why she can't just reason her way to frequent nose-touching is a sign of dishonesty from reflection alone, but can do so by reasoning from her conclusion about a particular suspect. Moorean reasoning offers a detour around the impediment.

Anemic conservatism sometimes licenses Moorean forms of reasoning in humdrum cases, but that's no strike against it, since Sasha's reasoning is unobjectionable. What matters, from the perspective of the Same Boat Hypothesis, is whether anemic conservatism licenses Moorean reasoning in response to global skeptical hypotheses: that is, whether it is consistent with Moore 1–3 and Moorean Induction 1–3 being good reasoning. That question is tricky. It turns on why Mooreans think we can't form justified beliefs in not-BIV and not-NUW via a priori reflection alone. A plausible account of why not is that we should not trust ourselves to so reason — that we have compelling grounds to doubt our ability to figure out what are surroundings are like, or what the future will be like, by a priori reflection alone. A little more carefully, we ought to believe:

Rational limitation thesis – surroundings: humans can typically only form justified contingent beliefs about their surroundings via reasoning that, at some point, depends upon perception or perceptual beliefs. 

Rational limitation thesis – future: humans can typically only form justified contingent beliefs about the future via reasoning that, at some point, depends upon induction.

17. A possible type of counterexample includes claims such as there are not exactly 123456789 planets in the universe: this claim is contingent and plausibly a priori. I am inclined to say that if such beliefs are justified a priori it is on the basis of some very weak version of the principle of indifference. But thinking that we have a priori justification to believe there are not exactly 123456789 planets in the universe on the basis of some version of the principle of indifference does not give reason to believe that we can arrive at not-BIV through armchair reasoning; in fact, the principle of indifference (in its stronger guises) weighs against not-BIV being a priori.

18. A complication: sometimes we can form justified belief about the future on the basis of testimony. This is no great objection to the thesis in question.
Here, once again, I mean rational rather than psychological dependence. If those theses are correct, there is an impediment to arriving at a justified belief in not-BIV or not-NUW via a priori reflection alone but no impediment to doing so via inference from perceptual or inductive beliefs. That’s just the sort of situation wherein anemic rationalism licenses Moorean reasoning.

Why believe in the rational limitation theses? Each thesis makes two claims: first, it makes a claim about the limited means we can use to form justified beliefs; second, it claims that this limitation is due to features of our constitution or reasoning ability. I doubt that the first sort of claim will be too controversial. For one thing, premises Nasty-1 and Nasty Induction-1 depend, for their plausibility, on the thought that the only way to learn about one’s surroundings and the future depend upon perception and induction. In addition, a boring and empirical argument by elimination supports the limitation claims: I don’t see other routes that we use to form justified beliefs about contingent claims about our surroundings or the future. When I observe people forming justified beliefs about their surroundings or the future, they always do so in a way that depends upon perception or induction.

The more controversial part of the rational limitation theses — but one essential to making anemic rationalism and Mooreanism compatible — is that the lack of means independent of perception and induction is due to limitations in us. Might these limitations not arise for all possible reasoners? I doubt it. It is not so hard to imagine creatures that learn about their surroundings without perception. They might causally interact with their surroundings and form (mostly) accurate beliefs about them, cutting out the middleman of sensation; blindsight appears to have just this character. It is a bit trickier, but still possible, to imagine reasoners who form justified beliefs about the future without using induction. Perhaps instead of expecting the future to resemble the past they expect the past and future together to form a satisfying pattern. Imagine that this practice of reasoning has generally

been reliable for these reasoners and that it is self-reinforcing: the pattern formed by this method of reasoning continuing to be reliable in the future is satisfying to them. I’m inclined to count this as a different way of forming justified beliefs about the future (though one not open to us, since we don’t have feelings about which patterns are satisfying that tend to lead us the right way). Another possibility is that there are creatures that have strong visual sensations about the future: it is sometimes as if they can see the future. Of course the future doesn’t cause these sensations but they are on the whole quite reliable — perhaps natural selection weighed in favor of faculties that produce largely accurate visual images of the future. This, too, I’m inclined to count as a way of forming justified beliefs about the future though it’s certainly not a method that you and I can use. As a result, confinement to perception and induction appears to be our lot as humans rather than a necessary feature of reasoning in general.19

Of course, the rational limitation theses alone do not establish that Moorean responses to skepticism succeed; it must also be true that we have justification in the anemic sense to believe not-BIV and not-NUW prior to engaging in Moorean reasoning. Put another way, the rational limitation theses (and similar impediments to paths of reasoning) must be the only reason why there is no undefeated deliberative route from our evidence to not-BIV and not-NUW. Do we have such anemic justification? Skeptics may balk at this suggestion and insist that, in addition, we just lack sufficient evidence for not-BIV or not-NUW. But, of course, rationalists are in no position to take that line of objection against Mooreans. And this makes rationalists ill-positioned, if we ought to believe in the rational limitation theses, to say what’s wrong with Moorean responses to skepticism.  

19. These different types of reasoners would not be immune to nasty skeptical hypotheses. For them, but not for us, an evil demon is messing with my blindsight or an evil demon is feeding me deceptive visual sensations about the future are nasty skeptical hypotheses. So, these different creatures would need Moorean reasoning too: that feature of our epistemic situation looks unavoidable for creatures with fallible faculties (or rather faculties that they cannot be certain are infallible).
Thinking about possible reasoners who do not share our limitations. Then, provides some support for the rational limitation theses: it shows that our reliance on perception and induction stems from the nature of our cognitive faculties. There’s another, quite separate, argument for anemic rationalism. To see it, though, we need to dive into a bit of somewhat more formal material.

VII. A formal argument for rationalism?

Earlier I alluded to (and set aside) a formal argument for rationalism that is quite distinct from any worries about Mooreanism’s anti-skeptical force. This argument is quite powerful. However, I doubt it sheds much light on our central question about whether rationalism represents an anti-skeptical alternative to Mooreanism. The formal argument provides good reason to accept anemic rationalism but little reason to accept robust rationalism.20

The argument trades on claims about evidential probability (sometimes also called “epistemic probability”) — a measure of how strongly someone’s evidence supports a proposition. I will confine my discussion to some reasoner unimaginatively named S and abbreviate the evidential probability of p for S as Pr(p).

Also, I will use E to refer to S’s total body of evidence. Now, suppose S unambiguously has justification to believe some ordinary proposition p on the basis of his evidence: to fix ideas, p will be the 7 train will go to Flushing tomorrow and S is a lifelong Queens resident. Pr(p) is very high.

Now consider the material conditional E \to p. We can say two interesting things about Pr(E \to p) right away:

1. No matter what evidence S has, Pr(E \to p) \geq Pr(p).

This inequality holds because p entails E \to p and, in general, if x entails y then Pr(y) is an upper bound on Pr(x).

2. Pr(E \to p) prior to learning E \geq Pr(E \to p) after learning E

In general, learning that the antecedent of a conditional is true can never increase the evidential probability of the conditional as a whole.

Taken together, 1 and 2 show:

1. Pr(E \to p) prior to learning E \geq Pr(p) after learning that E

We know that Pr(p) after learning that E is very high: S, a lifelong Queens resident, has tons of evidential support for claims about the 7 train’s route. So, 3 tells us that the evidential probability of E \to p for S was very high prior to S learning that E. But — and here is the key point — E is all of S’s evidence. So Pr(E \to p) was high even when S had no evidence whatsoever. This is surprising because E \to p is a deeply contingent proposition: it could easily have been false. Obviously nothing in this story turns on details about the subway system: we can use this type of reasoning to show that lots of deeply contingent conditionals (with huge bodies of evidence as antecedents) have a high evidential probability even when we do not have any evidence whatsoever.

What does this argument show? One obvious answer is that it shows that we have a priori justification to believe E \to p. I don’t think this is wrong, exactly, but we should now pause to ask whether this argument shows robust or merely anemic a priori justification. As an argument for anemic a priori justification, these formal considerations are compelling: they show that no evidence whatsoever can be adequate evidence to believe E \to p. But these formal considerations do not really speak to robust justification: nothing in the argument looks well-positioned to establish that there is a sound deliberative route from no
evidence whatsoever to E→p. Of course the argument would establish robust *a priori* justification given the auxiliary claim that, in general, if Pr(p) is high then S has robust justification to believe that p. But that auxiliary claim is no good. For one thing, it badly misfires in the case of complex mathematical or logical truths, since those truths all have the highest possible evidential probability and yet we often lack robust justification to believe them (consider some true, complex mathematical claim that no one has, as yet, proven true or false: I cannot form a doxastically justified belief that it is true (or false) yet it has an evidential probability of 1). So, these formal considerations may well establish the truth of anemic rationalism, but do not establish robust rationalism.

Stepping back a bit, how does this formal argument for rationalism fit in to our larger discussion of rationalism and Mooreanism as anti-skeptical strategies? If the argument showed the truth of robust rationalism, it would show that we have little reason to reject rationalism as an anti-skeptical strategy. That wouldn’t mean that Mooreanism is false, but it would render it superfluous. However, the formal considerations show no such thing. They do provide strong reason to embrace anemic rationalism, but as we have seen anemic rationalism is consistent with Moorean reasoning being good reasoning — and, indeed, anemic rationalists need Moorean reasoning to respond to skeptics. So, while the formal considerations support a kind of rationalism, they do nothing to show that Mooreanism is either unnecessary or unacceptable as part of our response to skepticism.

**VIII. Conclusion**

Let’s take stock: we have so far surveyed three possible grounds for condemning Moorean reasoning, and found that rationalists cannot adopt any of them. Each of these diagnoses thus doubly fails: it fails to offer a plausible criticism of Moorean reasoning, and in addition fails to offer *(non-àd hoc)* grounds for rejecting the Same Boat Hypothesis. Of course, the above discussion does not exhaust possible diagnoses of Mooreanism: perhaps there’s a damning one out there that does not entail the Same Boat Hypotheses. For now, though, it is hard to see any solid basis for rejecting the Same Boat Hypothesis.

What follows from this investigation? First, we ought to be suspicious of our intuitions — intuitions that I share — that Moorean reasoning seems fishy. Skeptical arguments have a powerful hold on us: even students new to philosophy feel the force of evil demon-style skeptical arguments, and almost nobody initially finds either rationalism or Mooreanism remotely compelling. Yet it turns out to be a difficult affair to say just how these evil demon-style skeptical arguments are supposed to work, and even more difficult to articulate the ways in which Moorean replies seem viciously circular. We’ve managed to come up with three possible ways of spelling out this circularity, each of which suffers from a subtle problem. All of this complexity leads me to doubt that we should trust our guts here. Perhaps we intuitively latch on to something like the insensitivity diagnosis or the dialectical inefficacy diagnosis (conservatism is probably too sophisticated to describe anyone’s gut reaction) and just don’t have sufficiently nuanced intuitions to pick up on the problems with these approaches. In any case, even people who want to stick with their guts and count Moorean reasoning as no good still owe us a tenable story about what’s wrong with it.

Second, we have seen that there is little role for rationalism to play as an anti-skeptical alternative to Mooreanism: if rationalist responses to skepticism are kosher, they are also unnecessary because Moorean responses are kosher as well. The same boat thesis is true, so rationalism has nothing to offer as an anti-skeptical rival to Mooreanism.

One way to interpret this last result is that there is no reason to be a rationalist. I doubt, though, that that’s the right interpretation. A better interpretation is that it is a mistake to think of Mooreanism and rationalism as rivals. Mooreanism is a view about *good reasoning*: it says that arguments such as Moore 1–3 and Moorean Induction 1–3 are ways to acquire doxastically justified beliefs in their conclusions. We can also interpret rationalism as a theory about good reasoning: the view that you can form justified beliefs in not-BIV and not-Nuw through the simplest possible process of reasoning: you can just conclude them,
and thereby be doxastically justified. We’ve seen that any account of what’s wrong with Moorean reasoning will condemn that sort of rationalist response to a skeptic armed with VMN. However, rationalism need not be a theory of good reasoning at all. Another interpretation of rationalism is as a view about evidential support. Bodies of evidence can weigh for or against propositions. It’s tempting to think that an empty body of evidence — one containing no evidence — must, for any deeply contingent proposition p, give just the same degree of support to p as not-p. Rationalism, if it’s a thesis about evidential support, is just the denial of this claim: rationalists think empty bodies of evidence aren’t always impartial between p and not-p. Formal considerations, including the ones discussed in the previous section, provide powerful support for this interpretation of rationalism.

If rationalism is a view about evidential support and Mooreanism is a view about good reasoning, the two aren’t obviously rivals. This is good news for rationalists, since we’ve seen that rationalism as a thesis about good reasoning has no important anti-skeptical role to play. It’s also good for Mooreans, since there are some compelling formal arguments in favor of the rationalist view of evidential support and the Moorean view of reasoning does not diminish the strength of those arguments. The conclusion of my argument isn’t that rationalism is false, but rather that — when it comes responding to skeptical arguments — it has a role to play solely as a view about evidential support; as a result, even rationalists need a story about how to reason our way to the falsity of skeptical scenarios. Failure to discredit the Same Boat Hypothesis means that story will be — in key ways — Moorean.21

Works Cited:


21. For helpful feedback, I am grateful to Kieran Setiya, Cian Dorr, Karl Schafer, as well as to two anonymous referees.


