Introduction

Once someone has accepted the argument for external world skepticism, could any line of reasoning persuade them that knowledge of the external world is possible after all?

Many contemporary epistemologists think not. Here, for example, is Timothy Williamson (2000, 27):

Nothing said here should convince someone who has given up ordinary beliefs that they constitute knowledge…This is the usual case with philosophical treatments of skepticism: they are better at prevention than at cure. If a refutation of skepticism is supposed to reason one out of the hole, then skepticism is irrefutable. (emphasis mine)

And James Pryor (2000, 517-20):

The ambitious anti-skeptical project is to refute the skeptic on his own terms, that is, to establish that we can justifiably believe and know such things as that there is a hand, using only premises that the skeptic allows us to use. The prospects for this ambitious anti-skeptical project seem somewhat dim….Most fallibilists concede that we can’t demonstrate to the skeptic, using only premises he’ll accept, that we have any perceptual knowledge….the ambitious anti-skeptical project cannot succeed. (emphasis mine)

I aim to show that this widely-held view is mistaken. I think it is possible to rationally persuade an external world skeptic that we have knowledge of the external world. This paper presents an argument—which appeals only to premises that an external world skeptic could accept—for the claim that rationality requires us to believe that skepticism is false.

The strategy is to argue that accepting the argument for external world skepticism ultimately commits one to more extreme forms of skepticism in a way that is self-undermining. Section 1 presents the argument for skepticism about the external world, and shows that there is a parallel argument for skepticism about the past. Section 2 argues that skepticism about the past leads to skepticism about complex reasoning. Section 3 argues that it would be self-undermining to accept skepticism about complex reasoning on the basis of the argument from skepticism about the past, since that argument is complex. In particular, one would end up believing a proposition P while believing that one should not believe P. This combination of beliefs is not rational. So, section 4 concludes that it is not rational to accept the argument for external world skepticism, because doing so ultimately commits one to an irrational combination of beliefs. Section 5 replies to objections. Section 6 argues that suspending judgment on skepticism is also irrational. Section 7 argues that doxastic dilemmas are impossible—rationality cannot prohibit every possible doxastic attitude—and so rationality requires us to disbelieve skepticism.1 …

1 This may remind some readers of Crispin Wright’s paper “Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon.” While there are many similarities, the line of reasoning presented here is importantly different from Wright’s. Moreover, Wright’s project faces difficulties. Wright sets up the argument for external world skepticism in a distinctive way. There
I’ll make a few final big picture remarks before moving on to the substance of the argument. As noted earlier, most contemporary anti-skeptical projects do not aim to convince an external world skeptic. In this respect, my project is more ambitious than theirs. But there is another important difference—a respect in which my project is less ambitious: I don’t try to diagnose the flaw in the skeptical argument. I don’t isolate a particular premise as false, and explain why, despite its falsity, we found it compelling. In this respect my project is similar to G.E. Moore’s (1962); he also aimed to establish that we should reject the skeptic’s conclusion, but did not in the process diagnose the flaw in the skeptic’s argument.

Moore held that the skeptic’s conclusion can be rejected because it is incompatible with common sense. … However, I have argued elsewhere (Rinard 2013) that this Moorean approach is deeply flawed. Philosophical argument is, I have claimed, capable of rationally overturning our common sense convictions. This means that we cannot simply dismiss the skeptic; we must take seriously the possibility that they may be right. Rejecting the Moorean approach lends greater urgency to projects like the one pursued in this paper: our right to hold even our most basic beliefs about the world stands or falls with their success.

1. External world skepticism leads to skepticism about the past

This section argues that if it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is rational to accept skepticism about the past. This is because there is an argument for the latter that is perfectly analogous to the argument for the former.²

It’s possible that the external world is largely as you believe it to be. Call this scenario “Normal.” But there is also a possibility in which the way things appear to you is exactly the same, but these appearances are radically deceptive; you are merely a bodiless brain in a vat (BIV). The skeptic’s argument begins:

(1) One’s basic evidence about the external world is restricted to propositions about the way the external world appears.

The skeptic goes on to claim that this evidence is neutral between Normal and BIV; it doesn’t favor one over the other. After all, both hypotheses entail that one has the perceptual evidence that one does, e.g. that one seems to see hands, tables, chairs, etc. Since the hypotheses predict the evidence equally well, they are equally well supported by the evidence.³⁴ Thus the skeptic’s second premise (followed by the third):

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² There are many different formulations of the argument for external world skepticism. All share the same basic strategy, originating in Descartes (1996). It’s plausible that all extend to skepticism about the past, but space constraints allow detailed discussion of only one—which I take to be one of the strongest. Here I comment briefly on two others. Some common versions of the closure argument begin with the premise that for all one knows, one is a brain in a vat. But the skeptic’s argument is stronger if it provides some further justification for this claim, rather than taking it as an unargued premise. The underdetermination argument focuses on the existence of a gap between sensory evidence and external world beliefs. But what is the nature of this gap? If it is merely logical—that sensory evidence doesn’t entail external world propositions—then inductive skepticism is required for the argument to even get off the ground. Alternatively, if the gap is epistemic, then some further motivation is needed.

³ Here, evidential support is incremental support, not overall support. The overall worthiness of belief of a hypothesis depends both on (1) its worthiness of belief, independently of (prior to) one’s evidence; and (2) the incremental support from one’s empirical evidence.

⁴ Kevin McCain (2012) argues that while common sense hypotheses genuinely predict the evidence, skeptical hypotheses merely accommodate it. Here, I use “prediction” as equivalent to “probabilification.” On this usage, a
(2) Propositions about the way the external world appears are evidentially neutral between Normal and BIV.

(3) Neither Normal nor BIV is intrinsically more worthy of belief, independently of one’s evidence.\(^5\)

From (1) – (3) it follows that one neither knows, nor is justified in believing, that BIV is false. Just one more premise—the closure principle—is needed for full-on external world skepticism: \(^6\)

(4) If one neither knows nor is justified in believing Q, and one knows that P entails Q, then one neither knows nor is justified in believing P.

(1) – (4) yield the skeptic’s conclusion:

(5) For many external world propositions P, one neither knows nor is justified in believing P.\(^7\)

To construct an analogous argument for skepticism about the past, first, consider a more detailed version of BIV. Suppose your creators want to deceive you about your past as well as your external surroundings. Due to budgetary constraints, they can afford to keep your brain in existence for only one minute; but, since they want to simulate a typical human experience, they implanted your brain with false apparent memories such that what it’s like to have these apparent memories is exactly the same as what it’s like for you in Normal to really remember what happened. Call this scenario BIV(NoPast).\(^8\)

We can now construct an argument for skepticism about the past simply by taking our argument for external world skepticism and replacing “the external world” with “the past,” and “BIV” with “BIV(NoPast)”:

(1*) One’s basic evidence about the past is restricted to propositions about the way the past appears (i.e. the way one seems to remember things having been).

(2*) Propositions about the way the past appears are evidentially neutral between Normal and BIV(NoPast).

(3*) Neither Normal nor BIV(NoPast) is intrinsically more worthy of belief, independently of one’s evidence.

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\(^5\) Features such as simplicity, coherence, etc. are sometimes thought to make for greater intrinsic worthiness of belief. With premise (3), the skeptic is denying either that Normal has greater simplicity/unification/etc. than BIV, or that differences of this kind make for greater worthiness of belief.

\(^6\) Although most accept it, Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981) are two prominent deniers of the closure principle for knowledge. Note, however, that it is far less common, and far more implausible, to deny closure for justification. The argument for skepticism about justification remains intact even if closure for knowledge is rejected.

\(^7\) Why many, and not all? Because this particular argument leaves a few beliefs untouched (e.g. a brain exists). But it undermines the bulk of our substantive external world beliefs (e.g. I have hands, tables exist, etc.).

\(^8\) Perhaps the most famous skeptical hypothesis concerning the past is Russell’s (1921, 159), in which the world sprang into existence five minutes ago, complete with a group of people who seem to remember what we actually remember.
(4*) If one neither knows nor is justified in believing \( Q \), and one knows that \( P \) entails \( Q \), then one neither knows nor is justified in believing \( P \).

Therefore,

(5*) For many propositions \( P \) about the past, one neither knows nor is justified in believing \( P \).

One who accepts the premises of the argument for external world skepticism should also accept the premises of the argument for skepticism about the past. It would be unacceptably arbitrary to accept (1) while rejecting (1*). The justification given for (2) carries over to (2*). Any reason for rejecting (3*) would constitute an equally good reason for rejecting (3). (4) and (4*) are identical.

This section defended the following claim:

Claim I: If it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is rational to accept skepticism about the past.

2. Skepticism about the past leads to skepticism about complex reasoning

The rough idea behind the argument in this section is as follows: In complex reasoning one relies on one’s memory. But if skepticism about the past is true, one is not justified in relying on one’s memory, and so not justified in believing the conclusions of complex reasoning.\(^9\)

What do I mean by “complex reasoning,” and “skepticism about complex reasoning”? Reasoning counts as complex when it involves multiple steps, not all of which can be held in one’s head at once—that is, one cannot, all in one moment, consciously grasp each step and how they all come together to yield the conclusion. For example, suppose one begins with some premise \( A \), and then infers (either deductively or inductively) \( B \) from \( A \), \( C \) from \( B \), and so on, finally concluding that \( G \). Suppose that, by the time one infers \( G \) from \( F \), one no longer has in one’s head the details of the argument by which one reasoned from \( A \) to \( G \); one simply seems to remember having done so. Then the reasoning from \( A \) to \( G \) counts as complex. Most proofs in math and logic are complex; so are non-deductive arguments for, say, the occurrence of climate change, or the claim that the stock market will have an average annual return of at least 8% over the next century. Most interesting philosophical arguments are complex.\(^10\)

Skepticism about complex reasoning is the view that one could not come to know, or be justified in believing, any proposition on the basis of complex reasoning. I will now sketch an argument for skepticism about complex reasoning which has skepticism about the past as a premise. … Let \( G \) be the conclusion of an arbitrary complex argument. Consider an agent who is initially not justified in believing \( G \). They then carefully and correctly go

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\(^9\) Richard Fumerton (1995, p. 49) argues, in a similar vein, that skepticism about the past leads to skepticism about reasoning that takes place over time.

\(^10\) Pasnau (2014) recounts a lively debate, going back to the Middle Ages and beyond, concerning which arguments can be grasped, in their entirety, all at once. (For example, Burge (1993) denies that even single-step inferences can be grasped all at once.) Poston (2016) contains an extensive discussion of how much is contained in the “fleeting present.”
through the argument for G. Since the argument is complex, at the moment they conclude that G, they don’t have in their head the earlier steps of the argument. They merely seem to remember that they went through an argument for G. But if skepticism about the past is true, they are not justified in trusting their apparent memory, because they are not justified in believing any proposition about the past. For all they know, they haven’t even been in existence long enough to have gone through an argument for G. So, by the time they conclude that G, they are not justified in believing it. …

That is, if skepticism about the past is true, then despite having gone through a complex argument for G, the agent is not justified in believing it. So it follows from skepticism about the past that one cannot come to know, or be justified in believing, a proposition by going through a complex argument for it. …

Suppose that Candace carefully and correctly goes through a complex argument for P. When she finally infers P, she no longer has in her head the steps of this argument; she merely seems to remember having gone through some argument or other for P (and she has no independent reason to believe P). Then, Candace learns that she is under the influence of a drug that makes one’s memory unreliable, in the following sense: People who have taken this drug often have false apparent memories. Much of what they seem to remember never, in fact, happened. It is plausible that upon learning this, Candace should suspend judgment on whether she did, in fact, go through an argument for P, and, consequently, suspend judgment on whether P is true. After all, she does not have in her head any argument for P, and she has no independent reason to believe P. …

[We] can see skepticism about the past as playing a role analogous to the role played, in the example just given, by Candace’s knowledge of having taken the drug. What the knowledge of the drug does, first and foremost, is make it unreasonable for Candace to trust her apparent memories. It is this that then makes it unreasonable for her to believe propositions that she has in fact derived via complex reasoning. Skepticism about the past has the same effect. First and foremost, it makes it unreasonable for the agent to trust their apparent memories. Just as in the drug case, this means that it is unreasonable for the agent to believe the deliverances of complex reasoning. Skepticism about the past, and knowledge of having taken a memory-distorting drug, both have this result, because both make the agent unjustified in trusting their apparent memories. …

To summarize, this section has argued that the following claim should be accepted by those external world skeptics who accept [the above]:

Claim II: If it’s rational to accept skepticism about the past, then it’s rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

3. It is not rational to accept skepticism about complex reasoning

This section argues that it is not rational to accept the argument, described in section 2, from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

First, notice that this argument is itself complex. I cannot consciously grasp, all at once, why each step of the argument is plausible and how all the steps come together to support the conclusion. But the conclusion of this argument is that it is not rational to accept
complex arguments. So there is a sense in which the argument is self-undermining. As I will argue in this section, the self-undermining character of this argument manifests itself in the fact that if one accepts it, one ends up believing a proposition P while at the same time believing that it is not rational to believe P. This is an irrational combination of beliefs. So accepting the argument is not rational, since doing so results in an irrational combination of beliefs.

To see why, suppose one were to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to complex reasoning skepticism. Let P be the conclusion of this argument (i.e. the thesis of skepticism about complex reasoning). At the moment one accepts P, one knows one is not accepting it on the basis of a simple argument. After all, if one were accepting it on the basis of a simple argument, one would have all of the steps of that argument in one’s head at the moment one accepts P. However, one can tell at the moment of acceptance that one does not have in one’s head all the steps of an argument for P.

Since one knows one is not accepting P on the basis of a simple argument, one knows that one of the two remaining possibilities obtains: either one is accepting P on the basis of a complex argument, or one’s acceptance of P is not based on any argument at all. Since one is a skeptic about complex reasoning, one believes that if the first possibility obtains, one’s belief in P is not rational. Consider now the second possibility. Recall that P is the proposition that skepticism about complex reasoning is true. Perhaps there are some propositions one could rationally believe without basing one’s belief on an argument (“1 = 1,” perhaps), but if there are, skepticism about complex reasoning is not among them. It is a highly surprising claim, far from obvious. So one also believes that if the second possibility obtains, one’s belief in P is not rational. So, one believes that one’s belief in P is not rational, no matter which of these two possibilities obtains.

That is, at the moment one accepts the conclusion of the argument for skepticism about complex reasoning, one believes P and one also believes that one’s belief in P is not rational. But this is not a rational combination of beliefs. So it is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning, because doing so results in an irrational combination of beliefs.

The foregoing relied on the following principle:

**Anti-Denouncement:** It is not rational to believe a proposition P while also believing that it is not rational for one to believe P.

The idea is that it is not rational to denounce one’s own belief, in the sense of believing it to be irrational. …

This section defended the following claim:

**Claim III:** It is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to complex reasoning skepticism.

**4. It is not rational to accept external world skepticism**

To summarize, this section brings together the three claims defended in sections 1-3. They entail that it is not rational to accept external world skepticism.
Claim I: If it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is rational to accept skepticism about the past.

Claim II: If it’s rational to accept skepticism about the past, then it’s rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

Subconclusion: If it’s rational to accept external world skepticism, then it’s rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

Claim III: It is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to complex reasoning skepticism.

Conclusion: It is not rational to accept external world skepticism.

5. Objections and Replies
Objection I:
The argument in section 3 for the claim that it is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning rests on the assumption that this argument is complex. But it’s not clear that it is.

Reply:
I think it is plausible that this argument is complex; I, at least, am not able to consciously appreciate, all at once, each individual step of the argument, why it is plausible, and how exactly all the steps combine to support the conclusion. However, my argument would go through even if this argument were simple, since this argument is in fact only a small part of the overall argument for skepticism about complex reasoning. The overall argument includes the argument for skepticism about the past, and the arguments for the premises of that argument (from the parallel with external world skepticism).

That is, the entire argument for skepticism about complex reasoning includes the argument for external world skepticism, the argument linking external world skepticism to skepticism about the past, the argument for skepticism about the past, and the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning. This argument is surely complex.\(^{11}\)

Objection II:
It may be plausible that, for actual humans, the argument for skepticism about complex reasoning is complex, since we are unable to hold this entire argument in our heads at once. However, whether an argument is complex or simple is agent-relative; it is (metaphysically) possible for there to be an agent, who although in all other respects is just like us, is able to hold incredibly long arguments in their head at once. In particular, they can hold in their head the entire argument for skepticism about complex reasoning. For this agent, this argument is simple, and so it would not be self-undermining for them to accept it—there is nothing self-undermining about accepting a simple argument for skepticism.

\(^{11}\) As noted above, Pasnau (2014) presents a history of an extended debate in philosophy concerning which arguments can be grasped in their entirety at once. Some, such as Burge (1993), hold that we are unable to do this even for very short arguments.
about complex reasoning. Since this agent is in all other respects like us, they will find each premise of the argument individually plausible, and so, since the argument is simple for them, they will accept it, and come to believe skepticism about the external world, the past, and complex reasoning. In short: if there were an agent with certain enhanced cognitive abilities, they would be a skeptic.

The reasoning just given (continues the objector) should be accepted by anyone who accepts the argument in sections 1-4. Such a person would then be in the following peculiar situation: because they accept the argument in sections 1-4, they think it would not be rational for them to believe skepticism, and so they don’t believe it. But, at the same time, they know that if there were an agent just like them, except with certain enhanced cognitive abilities, that agent would believe skepticism. This combination of beliefs is not rational, according to the following principle:

**Deference:** If one (rationally) believes that a cognitively enhanced version of oneself would believe P, then rationality requires one to believe P.

Deference is very plausible. For example, suppose you’re uncertain about whether Goldbach’s conjecture can be proved. You then learn that if there were a version of yourself with enhanced cognitive abilities—specifically, enhanced mathematical abilities—that enhanced agent would believe that there is a proof of Goldbach’s conjecture. Plausibly, upon learning this information, you are rationally required to believe there is such a proof. This suggests that Deference is true. If so, then it would not be rational to accept the argument given in sections 1-4.

Reply:
I agree with the objector that Deference is plausible, and I agree that the Goldbach’s Conjecture case shows that something in the vicinity of this principle must be true. Nevertheless, we have independent reason to think that, as stated, Deference is false. I will argue that the properly revised version of Deference does not have the consequence that anyone who accepts the argument in sections 1-4 has an irrational combination of beliefs. First, though, note that the objector is not obviously correct in assuming that an enhanced agent would believe skepticism. It might be that if one were enhanced in this way, one would no longer believe the skeptic’s premises. … Nevertheless, for the remainder of my reply I will assume the objector is right that the enhanced agent would accept skepticism, since I think the objection fails in any case, because the key principle on which it relies does not hold in the case of the non-skeptic.

The following consideration shows that Deference, as stated, is false. As the objector noted, we have good reason to doubt that an enhanced agent actually exists. However, according to Deference, we are rationally required to believe that such an agent does exist. This is because we know that if there were an enhanced agent, they would know that they are enhanced in a certain way, and so they would believe that an enhanced agent (namely, themselves) exists. According to Deference, one should believe whatever one knows an enhanced agent would believe, so according to Deference, one should believe that an enhanced agent actually exists. Clearly this is the wrong result, and so Deference, as stated, is false.12

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12 Similar arguments appear in Plantinga (1982). One might respond by modifying Deference as follows: One should believe whatever an enhanced agent would advise one to believe. Presumably an enhanced agent would not advise you
Nevertheless, the Goldbach’s conjecture case shows that some principle in the vicinity of Deference must be true. The crucial question, then, is this: Will the correct version of Deference (whatever it is) still entail that it would not be rational to decline skepticism on the basis of the argument in sections 1-4? …

Suppose [a] non-skeptic were to adopt the belief, on the basis of [the correct version of] Deference, that skepticism is true. That is, suppose they were to reason as follows: An enhanced agent would believe skepticism. One should believe whatever one believes an enhanced agent would believe. So I should believe skepticism.

If they accept skepticism on the basis of this argument, their position is self-undermining, because the above argument for skepticism about complex reasoning is complex. (This is because it relies on the assumption that an enhanced agent would believe skepticism, and the argument for this is complex.)

I take this to show that Deference gives the wrong result in the case of the agent who, on the basis of my argument, gives up the belief that skepticism is true. This is because we have independent reason to believe that Deference fails in cases in which following it would lead one into a self-undermining position, and this is true in the case of the non-skeptic. …

6. It is not rational to suspend judgment on external world skepticism
So far, I have presented an argument, which could persuade an external world skeptic, for the claim that believing external world skepticism is not rational. The former skeptic may now come to believe that skepticism is false. … However, some think that, rather than reverting to their original belief that they know many things about the world, the former skeptic should now suspend judgment on skepticism. …

According to this line of thought, the skeptic should suspend judgment on skepticism while believing, on the basis of the argument just given, that it’s rational to do so. I’ll call someone in this position a confident suspender. …

The position of the confident suspender … has a defect very similar to the one that undermined the position of the original external world skeptic. First, note that suspending judgment on external world skepticism commits one to suspending judgment on other kinds of skepticism as well. Earlier I argued that accepting external world skepticism commits one to also accepting skepticism about the past and thereby skepticism about complex reasoning. Similarly, suspending judgment on skepticism about the external world commits one to suspending judgment on skepticism about the past and thereby skepticism about complex reasoning. Let’s assume the confident suspender does so.

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13 The argument for this can be spelled out in more detail as follows. They believe a proposition, P (skepticism about complex reasoning). They know that they do not believe P on the basis of a simple argument (the argument in the above paragraph is not simple, because it relies on the claim that an enhanced agent would believe skepticism; the argument for this is complex.). They also know that P is not the kind of proposition that could be rationally believed on the basis of no argument. The only remaining possibility is that they believe P on the basis of a complex argument (this is in fact the case); but since they accept skepticism about complex reasoning, they believe that in this case they should not believe P. So they believe P while believing that they should not believe P.
Now, however, we can begin to see where the problem lies. The confident suspender believes a proposition P—the proposition that rationality requires them to suspend judgment on external world skepticism—on the basis of the argument sketched a few paragraphs back. This argument is complex. (It relies on the claim that it’s not rational to believe external world skepticism, and the argument for this (in sections 1-4) is complex.) So the confident suspender believes P on the basis of a complex argument, while suspending judgment on skepticism about complex reasoning. That is, they believe P while suspending judgment on whether believing P is rational. In doing so, they violate a plausible principle I call Belief Endorsement, which says, roughly, that rational agents endorse their own beliefs, in the sense of believing them to be rational. More precisely:

**Belief Endorsement:** Rationality prohibits combinations of attitudes of the following kind: One believes P, but one takes some doxastic attitude, *other than belief*, toward the proposition that belief in P is rational.¹⁴ …

### 7. Rationality requires disbelieving skepticism

I have now argued that *believing* skepticism is not rational (sections 1-4) and that *suspending judgment* on skepticism is not rational (the previous section). What rationality requires, I claim, is that we believe that skepticism is false.

This claim would be mistaken if the sceptical problem were an instance of a doxastic dilemma. A doxastic dilemma is a situation in which rationality prohibits believing P, rationality prohibits disbelieving P, and rationality prohibits suspending judgment on P. That is, a doxastic dilemma is a situation in which there is no doxastic attitude one could rationally take towards P. My view is that doxastic dilemmas are impossible. If so, then skepticism can’t be an instance of one.

It is central to our concept of rationality that rationality constitutes an ideal to which one could coherently aspire, and by which one could be guided. But if doxastic dilemmas were possible, rationality could not play this role in those cases. We cannot be guided by the voice of rationality if rationality tells us to neither believe, nor disbelieve, nor suspend judgment on P. We could not coherently aspire to conform to the requirements of rationality if there were doxastic dilemmas. Since I regard its ability to play this guidance-giving role as constitutive of rationality, I conclude that there are no doxastic dilemmas.

One might object that rationality could play its guidance-giving role even if there were a doxastic dilemma. What rationality would tell us to do, in such a case, is to take no doxastic attitude whatsoever toward the proposition in question. … [There are] various ways it could be the case that one takes no attitude toward some proposition P. One way is to be cognitively deficient in a way that renders one unable to understand P. One might lack one of the concepts contained in P, for example. But, I claim, such cognitive deficiency could not be a requirement of rationality, which represents an *ideal* way that an agent might be.

A second way to take no attitude toward P is to be capable of understanding P, but to have never, in fact, ever consciously entertained the question whether P. Again, it could not be a requirement of rationality that one inhabit so unreflective a state. …

¹⁴ Here I am working within a framework in which there are three doxastic attitudes: belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment.
Some hold that, once an agent considers the question whether P, if she neither believes P nor disbelieves P, then she suspends judgment on P. If so, then my argument for the claim that rationality cannot require taking no attitude is complete. …

In this section I have made a prima facie case for the claim that there are no doxastic dilemmas. This entails that skepticism is not an instance of a doxastic dilemma, which is a necessary condition for it to be the case that, as I claim, rationality requires disbelieving skepticism. I do not claim that my prima facie case against the possibility of doxastic dilemmas should convince everyone. There is much more that could be said on this point, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter further into the details of that debate. …

9. Conclusion
I have argued, using only premises that an external world skeptic could accept, that rationality requires us to believe that external world skepticism is false. At several points I have taken a stand on issues that remain controversial, such as the role of memory in complex reasoning; which arguments can be grasped, in their entirety, all at once, by ordinary humans; the status of various level-bridging principles (Anti-Denouncement, Belief Endorsement, Endorsement); and the possibility of doxastic dilemmas. There is more to be said on these and other points. In each case, however, a prima facie compelling case can be made; and an external world skeptic would not be committed to the opposing view just in virtue of their skepticism. Thus, the line of reasoning presented here could rationally persuade an external world skeptic, who shares the views endorsed here on these orthogonal issues, to give up their skepticism.

In contrast, many contemporary epistemologists regard the skeptic as a hopeless case, and the attempt to reason with the skeptic as a lost cause. The skeptic is portrayed as someone so far gone that there’s no point in trying to save them now. The best we can do is try to prevent others, who are not yet skeptics, from succumbing to the same fate. Thus Williamson’s observation that most responses to skepticism are “better at prevention than cure” 15 and Byrne’s remark that “the sceptic doesn’t need an argument; she needs treatment.” 16

The upshot of this paper is that this view of the situation is misguided. We need not regard the skeptic as someone who can’t be reasoned with. Each premise of the argument given here could be accepted by an external world skeptic. Once a skeptic accepts the conclusion of this argument—that rationality requires the belief that skepticism is false—they should then adopt that belief. It is possible to reason one’s way out of skepticism.

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15 Williamson (2000, 27)
16 Byrne (2004, 301)
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