
Semantic Externalism and Justified Belief about the External World

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Abstract: Philosophical skepticism about the external world seeks to call into question our knowledge of the external world. Some kinds of philosophical skepticism employ skeptical hypotheses to prove that we cannot know anything about the external world. Putnam tried to refute this kind of skepticism by adopting semantic externalism; but, as is now generally accepted, Putnam's argument is epistemically circular. Brueckner proposes some new, "simple" arguments that in his view are not circular. In this paper we evaluate Brueckner's simple arguments for refuting skepticism about the external world, and seek to demonstrate that they fail to prove that we can have knowledge about the external world. However, by appeal to the principle of privileged access, one of the Brueckner's arguments does indeed succeed in showing that we can have justified beliefs about the external world.

Keywords: Skepticism, Semantic Externalism, Privileged Access, Brueckner, Epistemic Circularity.

1. Putnam's Approach to Skepticism

According to the philosophical skepticism, propositions about the external world are not the possible objects of knowledge. In order to prove its claim, the general method of skepticism is first to establish a distance between, on the one hand, the evidence that could justify belief in a proposition, and on the other hand the truth of that proposition; and then to show that the evidence does not entail the truth. Accordingly, skeptics set out their claims in the form of a skeptical argument (Brueckner 1994: 827). In most cases, these arguments are based on hypotheses known as skeptical hypotheses. The content of such skeptical hypotheses includes a description of the world which is (i) different from the one we normally consider, (ii) consistent with our usual experiences, yet (iii) not distinguishable from the real world. One of the most famous of these hypotheses is the "Brain in a Vat" (BIV) scenario, which posits that humans are simply brains immersed in nutrients, whose (apparent) perceptions are being transmitted to their neural terminals by an advanced computer. Then the skeptic observes that assuming that we know some ordinary proposition about the external world is inconsistent with the fact that we do not know whether a skeptical scenario obtains or not; and from this, the skeptic concludes that we cannot know any proposition about the external world (Pritchard 2002:

217–18). Putnam argued that by accepting the thesis of semantic externalism, we can show that we know that we are not brains in a vat, and therefore block the skeptical result (Putnam 1981: 15). According to semantic externalism, the meaning and truth conditions of our propositions and the content of our intentional mental states are in some manner determined on the basis of the external, causal environment; in other words, the environment is effective in determining the content of intentional states (Kallestrup 2012: 62). In that sense, two persons may have identical intrinsic properties, but because of the difference in the environments in which they are located, differ as regards the content of their mental states. Putnam argues that by accepting externalism, the statement "I am a brain in a vat" comes out as false, independently of being expressed in the real world or in the world inside the vat, and therefore I do know that I am not a brain in a vat.

Many criticisms have been developed against Putnam's externalist argument, of which the most important—and the one with which this paper is concerned—turns on the claim that Putnam's argument is epistemically circular. By providing a detailed explanation of Putnam's argument, Brueckner (1986) sought to show what is needed to answer this criticism. He introduced some new versions of the externalist argument that are known colloquially as his "simple arguments." These arguments use other philosophical principles to avoid the problem of circularity. In this paper we evaluate these simple arguments, first carefully explaining the problem of epistemic circularity for Putnam's argument, and then examining Brueckner's proposals in its defense.

2. Epistemic circularity and Putnam's externalism

It is now generally accepted that Putnam's argument against skepticism is indeed epistemically circular (Brueckner 1986, Wright 1992, Davies 1995, Noonan 1998, Johnsen 2003). In response, philosophers have proposed alternative arguments that avoid this deficiency. In order to show precisely how Putnam's argument is epistemically circular, we focus on Brueckner's account of it. Brueckner's account, which he calls a "disjunctive argument," is based on the logically true proposition "Either I am a BIV or I am not" (Brueckner 1986: 154). According to Putnam's argument, if I am a BIV, the sentence "I'm a brain in a vat" is false because in that case, the words "brain" and "vat" refer not to the brain and vat, but to the brain* and vat*.¹ Also, if I'm not a BIV, the sentence

“I’m a brain in a vat” will be false. But Putnam wants to conclude that I’m *not* a brain in a vat.² So the argument is not complete: it is necessary to add to the above argument a premise such as the following, which will lead to the desired result:

(TC) The sentence “I am not a brain in a vat” is true if and only if I am not a brain in a vat

But this leads the argument into epistemically circularity, because unless we can know that we are in the real world, we cannot know that the truth condition of the sentence (TC) is that I am a brain in a vat. If I *am* a brain in a vat, the truth condition of (TC) will be that I am a brain* in a vat*. Indeed, more generally we may observe that if it has been proven that a sentence *p* is true, the knowledge of the content of *p* does not necessarily result; from a proof that *p* is true we cannot conclude that we know the proposition that *p*.³ Therefore, Putnam’s argument against skepticism cannot properly show that I know that I am not a brain in a vat, and therefore does not succeed in rejecting skepticism (Brueckner 1986: 164–65).

3. Brueckner’s simple arguments

Brueckner presents several externalist arguments that seek to avoid the problem of epistemic circularity, and at least at first glance do not have the complexity of Putnam’s arguments; hence they are known as simple arguments. Consider the following argument (Brueckner 2012: 6, 2016: 21):⁴

Brueckner’s Simple Argument against Skepticism 1 (SA1)

- (A) If I am a BIV, then my use of the word “tree” does not refer to trees
 (B) My use of the word “tree” refers to trees – So,
 (C) I am not a BIV [(A),(B)]

Premise (A) comes from Putnam’s semantic externalism. In the ordinary world, someone who uses the word “tree” refers to real trees because they have been causally associated with real trees in the external world. But a BIV has never been associated with real trees, and hence the truth conditions of the sentences (the meaning of the words) that a BIV expresses are different from the truth conditions of those sentences (those words) when asserted in the ordinary world. So if I am a BIV and say the word “tree,” the word does not refer to trees, but to tree*s. Premise (B) suggests that when I use the term “tree,” I am considering the real tree in the real world and I refer to it. Therefore, it is concluded that I am not a BIV. Brueckner (2010: 161) has also given another simple argument as follows:

Brueckner’s Simple Argument against Skepticism 2 (SA2)

- (A) If I am a BIV, then I am not thinking that trees are green
 (B) I am thinking that trees are green
 (C) So I am not a BIV

Again, Premise (A) comes from Putnam’s semantic externalism. Since the BIV does not refer to real trees when

it uses the term “tree,” if it honestly states that it believes that trees are green, the content of its belief is not that real trees are green. A BIV cannot think that trees are green, but can only think that tree*s are green*. At first it seems that premise (B) causes the argument to be circular because if I am a BIV I cannot think that trees are green. But, based upon the principle of privileged access, this premise is justified. According to the principle of privileged access, when our faculty of introspection is functioning properly, we can know what we are thinking by introspection (McLaughlin and Tye 1998: 350). In other words, if we use our common abilities in the formation of second-order beliefs, then if we think that *p*, we can know that we are thinking that *p*. This knowledge is *a priori* and we do not depend on empirical examination of the outside world to achieve it. Such knowledge is not justified experimentally. So from these two premises we can conclude that I am not a BIV. We will return to this issue in the next section.

But these simple arguments still encounter problems. In the case of SA1, two criticisms can be made: one critique is that the use of the premise (A) causes the argument to be epistemically circular. The skeptics can claim that this premise is based on the assumption that the word “tree,” in the language used in the vat or in the ordinary world, refers to *something*. But the point is that we can only know that the word “tree” refers *a posteriori*; but since the skeptical arguments are not based on experience, the use of such a premise is not permissible: hence the argument is epistemically circular. The second critique is raised against premise (B). According to the premise, I know that my word “tree” refers to trees; but the skeptic’s claim is that we do not know whether we live in the real world or not, and therefore we do not know that we are faced with real trees. In fact, the claim that the word “tree” in our language refers to trees is based on accepting the anti-skeptical position, and hence the argument is epistemically circular. Brueckner accepts this critique, but states that it is possible to rewrite the premise and avoid this critique (Brueckner 2010: 159)⁵. He claims it is true that I do not know whether I am a BIV or a human in the ordinary world, but it is not the case that I do not know anything about the language I use. In fact, I know that if the word “tree” does refer in my language, it refers to trees. This is *a priori* knowledge of the semantics of my language, and hence to appeal to it is not begging the question (Brueckner 2012: 8–9). Brueckner then tries to solve this problem by rewriting these premises in a conditional way. He says that, drawing on externalism, I can claim that I know *a priori* that if the word “tree” refers, it refers to something with which I casually interact; however, I do not know *a priori* that the word refers to something. So we can rewrite SA1 as follows:

Brueckner’s Simple Argument against Skepticism 3 (SA3)

- (A) If I am a BIV, then it is not the case that if my word “tree” refers, then it refers to trees
 (B) If my word “tree” refers, then it refers to trees –So,
 (C) I am not a BIV

But in our view, although rewriting the premises of SA1 in conditional form responds to the criticism, we are still not justified in accepting premise (B) in SA3. We are justified in accepting this premise only if we know that we are not a BIV. The premise says that if the word “tree” refers to something, it will refer to the real trees. But how could we know this? True, I know that if the word “tree” refers, it refers to the *trees in my world*, but the problem is that I do not know in which world I live. So it is true that if the word “tree” refers in my language, it will refer to *trees in my world*, but this does not mean that it refers to real trees in a real world. So this argument is still circular. In fact, if we want to make a non-circular argument, then instead of premise (B) in SA3 we should use the following two premises:

(B₁) If I am not a BIV, then if the word “tree” refers in my language, it refers to trees

(B₂) If I am a BIV, then if the word “tree” refers in my language, it refers to tree*s

It is clear that from these two premises we may not conclude that I am not a BIV. Therefore, SA3 is also epistemically circular and does not work.

Argument SA2 faces a similar problem. Premise (B) in SA2 claims that I think that trees are green; but if I am a BIV I can only think that tree*s are green*. The claim that I know that I think trees are green again causes the argument to be epistemically circular, because if I do not know that I am not a BIV, I cannot know that I am thinking about not tree*s but trees. In fact, although premise (A) in SA2 seems to be acceptable, premise (B) causes the argument to be circular.

One can answer this problem, however, by using the principle of privileged access. In this case, our justification for accepting the premise (B) in SA2 is based on privileged access, and premise (A) in this argument is justified according to semantic externalism; so SA2 is not circular. But there remains another problem, which the following section addresses.

4. Privileged access and semantic externalist arguments against skepticism

At least at first glance, it does not seem possible to accept both the privileged access thesis (henceforth PA) and semantic externalism (henceforth SE). According to SE, the meaning of our words is partly determined by the reference of our words in the external world; so external experiences are needed in order to find out what the meaning of our words is, and thus to know what we are thinking. But according to PA, this kind of self-knowledge does not come about through empirical investigation, and we know the meaning of our words without any external experiences.⁶ For example, consider someone who is thinking that drinking water quenches thirst. According to PA he knows what he is thinking about; but semantic externalists say that he does not know what the content of his belief is until he experimentally finds out what the word “water” refers to in the world he lives in. Consequently, the question arises of whether PA is intrinsically incompatible with SE, or whether this incompatibility is

achieved, for example, by unjustified use of an epistemological principle; in which this case these two theses are not themselves incompatible.⁷ Apart from the answer given to this question, it can be argued that the acceptance of the externalist arguments presented here is based on accepting the compatibility of these two theses. It is clear that if, in some way, it can be shown that PA and SE are incompatible, then the use of them in a single argument is not acceptable. There are compelling reasons in favor of SE, and PA is also intuitively acceptable, but there is no argument for the compatibility of these two theses. In fact, philosophers have gone to great effort to refute the arguments which have been presented to prove the incompatibility of PA and SE. But now for the sake of the argument, we assume that none of the arguments seeking to prove the incompatibility between PA and SE are successful, and that externalists have indeed shown that incompatibilist arguments are not sound.

Now the question is whether externalists can reject skepticism using PA to answer the circularity problem in SA2. We think that the answer to this question is negative: because from the fact that incompatibilist arguments are rejected, it does not follow that SE and PA are compatible; it only shows that they are *not incompatible*. In order to employ an argument that uses both SE and PA, we need to *know* that these two are compatible. To explain this, suppose that in a valid argument both SE and PA have used as premises and a conclusion *p* has been drawn. If these premises are incompatible, the proof that *p* is not epistemically significant, because from contradictory premises any result, including *p*, can be deduced. On the other hand, in order to be able to conclude that I know that *p*, we must also *know* the premises in order to, using the principle of epistemic closure, conclude that we know that *p*. If we know PA and SE, we do not need to have a separate proof for their compatibility, because knowing them would require their truth; but the problem is that we do not know PA and SE, but we are only *justified* in accepting them. Therefore, it is possible that, while accepting the two principles is reasonable, their combined application would lead to inconsistencies.

We would like to address a potential objection to the claim that since we do not know that SE and PA are compatible, we could not employ an argument that uses both SE and PA. Somebody may argue: you say any semantic externalist relying on privileged access must prove their compatibility. Call the idea that one cannot rely on the idea that SE and PA are compatible unless it has been proven that they are The Compatibility Principle. And call the idea that epistemic circularity is not accepted The Not-Accepted Principle. You rely on both The Compatibility Principle and The Not-Accepted Principle in your critique of SA2. The problem is that no one has proven these two principles are incompatible but no one has proven they are compatible either. Therefore your critique fails. But the answer is simple: we do not *know* that using SA2 we could not refute skepticism but we are justified to accept it. Since skepticism seeks to call into question our *knowledge* of the external world, our critique shows that using PA to answer the circularity problem in SA2 cannot refute skepticism about the external world. In other words, by using PA in SA2 we cannot conclude that we

can *know* propositions about the external world. But still we can justifiably accept them.

So, it can be said that the mere rejection of the arguments presented to prove the incompatibility between PA and SE does not establish their compatibility. Therefore, their compatibility is not proven. But since PA and SE are based on arguments that rely on strongly accepted intuitions, as long as their incompatibility has not been proven, we are justified in using them in a single argument. But it should be noted that we can no longer claim that we *know* the result of such an argument: in this case we are only *justified* in accepting the result.

We claimed above that SA2 is not successful in blocking skepticism about the external world. In this argument, premise (A) is based on the acceptance of SE and premise (B) is based on the acceptance of PA. But, as stated, this argument can only show that I am *justified* in accepting that I am not a BIV, but I still do not *know* that I am not a BIV. Therefore, according to what has been said, the use of the combination of SE and PA in an argument cannot lead to a rejection of skepticism about the external world. However, although such arguments do not rule out skepticism about the possibility of acquiring knowledge about the external world, by using both PA and SE we can show that we are justified in believing propositions about the external world. So SA2 is successful, at least, in blocking skepticism about the *justification* of our beliefs about the external world.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the present paper was to examine whether Brueckner's "simple arguments" were successful in blocking skepticism about the external world. Our evaluation showed that the first and third arguments (i.e., SA1 and SA3 respectively) are epistemically circular, and therefore unacceptable. Also, the second argument (i.e., SA2) uses both PA and SE, and we do not *know* that these two are compatible; so SA2 is not successful in blocking skepticism about the external world. However, SA2 succeeds in blocking the skepticism the justification of our beliefs about the external world.

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Notes

¹ If I am a BIV, there is no real vat in my world but rather something else, perhaps electrons in a certain pattern, that causes my perceptions. So in a vat world I casually interact with something that is not a real vat. Following Brueckner, in order to distinguish between the real vat and the vat in the vat world, we call the latter the "vat*".

² Note that if the sentence "I am a brain in a vat" is false, then the sentence "I am not a brain in a vat" is true.

³ Note that if *p* is proved to be false, it follows that I do not know *p*, because knowing *p* implies that it is true; but from the fact that I know that *p* is true, I cannot conclude that I know that *p*. Brueckner himself explains the epistemic circularity of Putnam's argument using the principle of disquotational truth (Brueckner 1999: 47). We do not go into this here.

⁴ Prior to Brueckner, Tymoczko had also pointed out some simple arguments (Tymoczko 1989). But since Brueckner also tried to overcome the defects of these arguments, and finally presented an account that evaded at least some of the critiques of the simple arguments, we are content to call this category of arguments "Brueckner's simple arguments."

⁵ By saying that my justification for believing (B) derives from my knowledge of the semantics of my own language, Brueckner (2016: 22–3) tries to show that SA1 is not circular. He thinks the circularity objection can be made to any argument with the *modus tollens* form. But the circularity objection raises here is not about the form of SA1. It simply says that I cannot know that my word "tree" refers to trees until I know that I am not a brain in a vat.

⁶ Externalists have accepted that if one can show that acceptance of semantic externalism leads to the conclusion that an individual has to conduct an empirical investigation of the environment in order to know the content of his mental state, externalism has encountered a serious problem. See, for example, Burge 1988, Falvey and Owens 1994, McLaughlin and Tye 1998.

⁷ In response to this question, philosophers are divided into two categories: compatibilists and incompatibilists, depending on whether they consider semantic externalism and the privileged access thesis to be compatible. For a detailed account see Kallestrup 2012.