Metajustification, Skepticism and the A Priori

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Abstract: Advocates of a priori justification argue that belief in strict empiricism itself cannot be justified without appealing to perception, which is question begging, or to some non-empirical source of justification, which violates strict empiricism. This is the problem of “metajustification” for empiricism. Albert Casullo has argued that rationalism is equally susceptible to this problem, leaving empiricism and rationalism stalemated. However, while the problem applies to both positions equally, the motivation for seeking metajustification does not. I suggest that there is only motivation to seek metajustification for an account of justification if that account itself admits of legitimate skeptical doubts. In this respect there is an asymmetry between rationalism and empiricism. Justiably formulating skeptical arguments against rationalism presupposes the legitimacy of a priori justification, whereas skeptical arguments against empiricism have no analogous presupposition. Since empiricism does, while rationalism does not, admit of legitimate skeptical doubts, there is motivation to seek metajustification for empiricism, but not for rationalism. Rationalism is thus immune to the problem of metajustification in a way that empiricism is not. Whatever other difficulties rationalism may have, there is no stalemate.

A standard line of argument employed by advocates of the existence of a priori justification is to maintain that alternative epistemological views, particularly empiricism, entail skepticism or are incoherent unless a priori justification is appealed to. Against such claims, Albert Casullo has argued that many of the standard rationalist reductios against empiricism themselves admit of alternative and equally conclusive formulations that apply to rationalism itself.

One such argument is based on the demand for “metareasons” or metajustification. Effectively, the demand for metajustification requires that belief in a theory of justification (whether empiricist, rationalist or some other) itself be justified. The argument that empiricist accounts cannot non-circularly provide their own metajustification, and so are inadequate, is at least as old as the critique of psychologism put forward by Edmund Husserl and others at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, Casullo maintains that this argument is equally

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applicable to rationalism, thus leaving rationalism and empiricism at a stalemate with regard to
metajustification.

A rationalist response to this argument must either provide a non-circular account of
metajustification that does not implicitly abandon the notion of a priori justification itself, or
must provide compelling reasons why it is legitimate to demand metajustification of empiricist,
but not of rationalist accounts of justification. Here I will develop a rationalist response to the
problem of metajustification along the lines of the latter option.

My contention is that it is legitimate to demand metajustification of empiricist but not of
rationalist accounts of justification because there is an asymmetry in the way in which skeptical
arguments function against empiricist and rationalist accounts of justification respectively.
Specifically, whatever justification a subject could have for believing in the truth of the premises
or the validity of an argument for skepticism regarding a priori justification will itself be a priori
in nature. Thus, formulating skeptical arguments against a priori justification as a kind of
justification itself presupposes the veracity of just this kind of justification. Alternatively,
justified acceptance of skeptical arguments against empirically justified beliefs has no such
analogous presupposition. I maintain that since denying the existence of a priori justification
based on skeptical arguments itself presupposes the existence of at least a limited range of a
priori justified beliefs, the demand for metajustification is unmotivated; whereas the absence of
any such presuppositions in skeptical arguments against empiricism renders the demand for
empiricist metajustification appropriate.

I will proceed by articulating the notions of “a priori” and “empirical” justification being
appealed to, by providing an account of the problem of metajustification for both empiricism and
rationalism, and then by articulating the asymmetry in formulations of skepticism against
empirical and a priori justification respectively.

1. A Priori and Empirical Justification

The definition of a priori justification that I will use in this paper is that an a priori
justified belief is a belief in a proposition that is general\(^5\) or modal (involving necessity or

\(^5\) A paradigm example of a general belief would be belief in a universally quantified proposition such as “All
humans are mortal”. However, the crucial notion of generality that is intended here is generality of belief relative to
the sum total of all relevant empirical experiences. Thus a general belief is belief in a proposition the informational
content of which transcends all information that a subject has been provided with by perceptual experiences alone.
Accordingly, “All humans are mortal” is general in this sense (the information contained in the proposition goes
beyond the information that any single human being could gather by empirical investigation), whereas “All the
possibility) or both that is based on reason, reflection or intuition alone, or taken together with perceptual experience. The corresponding definition of empirical justification is that it is belief in a proposition based on immediate or mediate sensory perception. I include in sensory perception both perception involving the five standard modalities, as well as introspective reports about one’s current mental states (e.g. “I am in pain”, “I am experiencing red”, etc.). In this section I will provide some considerations meant to clarify and motivate these definitions.

A priori justification can be characterized in both a negative and a positive manner. The negative, standard and largely consensual definition of ‘a priori justification’ is that it is justification for belief that is independent of experience. This definition presupposes a division of the concept “experience” into two senses, one broad and one narrow. In the broad sense “experience” includes the full range of phenomena that are, actually or potentially, accessible to a conscious subject. In the narrow sense of ‘experience’, the sense that applies in the characterization of a priori justification just given, ‘experience’ means specifically phenomena that a conscious subject has access to based on introspection and via the various modes of sensory perception. A priori justification, then, is justification for belief that is independent of experience in the “narrow” sense of introspection and sensory perception, whereas empirical justification is precisely justification for belief that is based on such introspective observation or sensory perception.

The positive account of a priori or non-experiential justification under consideration here is closest to that put forward by Laurence Bonjour in his book *In Defense of Pure Reason*. Bonjour maintains that a priori justification, what he calls “rational insight”, involves a proposition or fact appearing to a subject, after careful reflection, to be necessarily true (or false). By ‘careful reflection’ Bonjour means that a subject’s reasoning is unhampered by entrenched dogmatism or personal bias, that the subject has thought about the proposition.

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6 The kind of empiricism that I am dealing with here is thus ‘strict’ empiricism of the sort that rejects the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, as opposed to the logical empiricism of thinkers such as A. J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic*. New York: Dover, 1952. I believe that the arguments of this paper apply to both kinds of empiricism, however dealing with logical empiricism would require dealing with issues of analyticity in much more depth than space here allows, and I am thus content if I can establish the arguments with regard to strict empiricism.


carefully, and also that certain background conditions, such as that the subject’s memory be functioning properly, that the subject be conscious, etc. are satisfied. By ‘necessary’ Bonjour means true in all possible worlds or circumstances.

The nature and importance of such a conception of a priori justification for a non-skeptical account of epistemic justification can be seen both by considering specific examples, and by considering arguments against versions of empiricism that deny the existence of a priori justification.

An example of a priori justification along the lines of BonJour’s definition would be reflecting on the argument “If it’s pouring, then it’s raining, it’s pouring, therefore it’s raining”, and after replacing the non-logical terms a finite number of times, coming to apprehend or realize that the argument pattern “If P then Q, P, therefore Q” is valid, or holds necessarily for all possible one-new-term substitutions of the non-logical terms. A more sophisticated example of “careful reflection” leading to rational insight regarding the necessary truth of a proposition would be Aristotle’s discussion of the law of non-contradiction as it applies to being in the *Metaphysics*, or more generally, any thought experiment in the literature of ethics, personal identity or the philosophy of mind that is meant to convince its readers that something could be true on some possible world, must be true on every possible world or cannot be true on any possible world.

What is essential for the argument of this paper (that empirical justification is while a priori justification is not susceptible to objections based on the issue of metajustification) is the role played by a priori justification in justifying belief in propositions that are either general or modal in nature, or both. To render this point more perspicuous, I will briefly articulate two arguments against strict empiricism, the view that all justification is immediately or mediate based on sense perception, to the effect that on such a view both the generalizations of empirical science and the modal claims made on behalf of propositions in mathematics, logic and

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11 For example, John Searle’s attempt to demonstrate that it is impossible for a computer running a program alone to understand or experience meaning in the way that humans do based on his “Chinese Room” thought experiment in John Searle, “Minds, Brains and Programs”, *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980):417-457; or Bernard Williams’ famous “integrity objection” from Williams, B. ”A Critique of Utilitarianism”, in Smart, J.J.C. & Williams, B. *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
metaphysics, fundamentally lack justification. The crucial premises in both of these arguments are (i) that the content of sensory perception is by its nature particular or concrete, and (ii) that no mental state can serve as justification for belief in a proposition whose content goes beyond that of the mental state in question.

The role of rational insight in justifying beliefs in general propositions can be seen by reflecting on what has come to be called the “generality argument.” The generality argument states that empirical perception is limited to experience of particulars, and that no experience of particulars by itself can justify belief in a proposition with general content. However, the principles required to inferentially or mediately justify general beliefs on the basis of perception (ampliative or inductive principles of inference) are themselves general, and so stand in the same need of justification as do other general beliefs. Since experience alone cannot justify a general belief, it cannot justify general belief in the principles necessary for justifying general beliefs on the basis of perceptual experience. Therefore perception, the basis of all empiricist justification, cannot directly justify belief in ampliative principles of inference or any other general beliefs. If this is so, then strict empiricism entails a nearly universal skepticism about the possibility of justified general beliefs in propositions of the sciences, mathematics and logic. The reason for this is that the empiricist conception of justification is not sufficiently strong to provide an account of justification for belief in inductive or probabilistic inferences, and so fails to account for justified beliefs in anything other than particular individuals or perceptually experienceable groups of such individuals. Thus, if belief in probabilistic or universal generalizations is ever justified, it must be justified, at least in part, on a priori grounds.

Just as belief in probabilistic and universal generalizations goes beyond the content of purely perceptual experience, and so cannot be justified on its basis alone, so also does belief in modal propositions about necessity and possibility. This point has recently been made regarding belief in the propositions of metaphysics by E. J. Lowe in his book The Possibility of

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12 I should stress that I here have in mind strong or ‘radical’ versions of empiricism of the sort most likely attributable to J.S. Mill and W. V. Quine. This version of empiricism is to be distinguished from more ‘moderate’ versions of empiricism, such as those advocated by many of the Logical Positivists, which seek to ground logical and mathematical truths in an account of analyticity. For more on the distinction between moderate and radical empiricism see, Bonjour, In Defense of Pure reason, chapters 2—3.


14 Being of the form, for example, “If n number of observed Ys under conditions C exhibit property P, then some % of or all Ys possess property P in conditions C.”

15 For an attempt at an a priori justification of induction, see Bonjour, In Defense of Pure Reason, chapter 7.
Lowe’s position is that metaphysics is the study, not only of the actual, but also of all possible basic structures or features of existence. Lowe argues that metaphysics is and must be an a priori discipline that is prior to empirical science both (i) because some conception of what is possible is required in order for researchers to pass judgment about what is actual, and (ii) because what is actual by itself is insufficient to provide knowledge either of what is possible (of what is not, but could have been or could be) or of what is necessary (of what both is and cannot be otherwise).  

Lowe illustrates this point with a discussion of the distinction between “substantial change”, the change a thing undergoes when it ceases instantiating one natural kind and begins instantiating another, and “phase change”, the change that a thing undergoes when it is subject to a major transformation but continues to instantiate the same natural kind. As an example of the first, Lowe cites the transformation of a piece of wood into ashes when it is burned, while as examples of the second Lowe cites the transformation of water into ice by freezing, and of a caterpillar into a butterfly by metamorphosis. Lowe’s contention is that empirical observation or evidence alone cannot provide principled reasons for deciding when a thing has and when it has not continued to instantiate the same natural kind after undergoing some kind of transformation. Justified belief about how a thing actually is cannot by itself serve to ground justified belief either about how it must be or about how it could be. If there are justified beliefs about such matters at all, Lowe’s contention is that they will be a priori justified beliefs based on knowledge of the relevant metaphysical categories and their associated identity and persistence conditions. Thus knowing about the logical, the metaphysical or the natural possibilities and necessities of a given thing is, at least in part, a matter of having certain a priori justified beliefs about these modal claims, and empirical evidence alone cannot serve to justify such beliefs.

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17 Lowe, The Possibility of Metaphysics, chapter 8.
18 Both Bonjour and Lowe concede that some beliefs in necessary truths can or even must be known a posteriori, based on empirical evidence and observation. This does not affect the point of the argument here, however, insofar as such a posteriori justification for belief in propositions about necessity or possibility will itself involve prior appeals to a priori justification. For example, suppose Kripke and Putnam are correct in their view that “Water is H2O” is both necessarily true and knowable only a posteriori, hence empirically. It nevertheless remains the case that knowing that “Necessarily Water is H2O” requires applying the a priori justified belief that identity is a necessary relationship with the empirical discovery that water is identical to H2O. The modal component of this knowledge is supplied by a premise whose justification involves entirely a priori reasoning, even if the particular necessary truth (“Water is H2O”) turns out to require some empirical investigation to discover.
Thus empirical justification alone is insufficient to justify beliefs that have either general content or modal content or both. Because the content of perception is always particular, no individual perception or set of individual perceptions is by itself sufficient to justify either a general belief itself, such as “all or most swans are white”, or belief in the sorts of ampliative principles of inference that are involved in probabilistic and inductive reasoning. Because perception provides information only about what is, and not about what must or could be, it cannot serve by itself to justify beliefs about necessity or possibility, such as that “nothing can both have and not have the same property at the same time” or that “it is possible for a bachelor to survive his marriage”.

In light of the foregoing discussion, the definition of a priori justification that I am using in this paper, that an a priori justified belief is a belief in a proposition that is general or modal or both that is based on reason, reflection or intuition alone, or taken together with perceptual experience, should be essentially clear. While I do not consider the account given here to be complete, it should be sufficient to make clear the sort of position regarding a priori justification that is under consideration.

2. The Problem of Metajustification

As noted above, the problem of metajustification has been put forward as a reason for believing that strict empiricist accounts of justification are incomplete or even incoherent. However, Albert Casullo has argued that metajustification is as much a problem for rationalist accounts of justification as it is for empiricism, and that this leaves the two positions at a stalemate regarding the issue of metajustification. In this section I will state the problem of metajustification and rehearse Casullo’s reasons for maintaining that metajustification is equally a problem for both empiricism and rationalism. In the next section I will argue that there are compelling reasons why it is appropriate to demand metajustification of empiricist, but not of rationalist accounts of justification.

The demand for metajustification is the requirement that in order for a subject S to be justified in believing that P, not only must S have a first-order reason R for believing P (where R might be an appeal to perceptual experience, memory, testimony, or etc.), but also a second-order reason (a metareason) MR for believing that their first-order reason R is in fact justification for the belief in P (that is, reason for believing that R does make it likely that P is true). The demand for metajustification thus requires that to be justified in believing a proposition P a
subject $S$ must not only have a reason $R$ that makes it likely that $P$ is true, but also a further reason $MR$ for believing that $R$ makes it likely that $P$ is true. On this construal of metajustification, possession of metajustification is a necessary condition for being justified at all in believing that $P$ on the basis of some reason $R$.\footnote{There is an important distinction regarding metajustification worth noting here. As I have formulated the matter, following BonJour and Casullo, possession of metajustification is a necessary condition for possession of epistemic justification per se. Thus, the justification that a subject has for believing a given proposition depends “essentially”, as it were, on the metajustification the subject has for believing that their basic reason for believing that $P$ does indeed make the truth of $P$ likely. An alternative way of formulating the question of metajustification would be as a request for reasons to believe that a theory of epistemic justification itself (such as rationalism or empiricism) is true. In this case a subject’s being justified in believing that $P$ could simply involve that subject possessing a reason that makes the truth of $P$ likely, without any additional requirement about other beliefs that the subject has to be justified in holding. On such a view of the matter, providing metajustification would amount to providing reasons to believe that a given theory of epistemic justification is correct. However, the source of these reasons could, in such a case, be the very same source posited by the theory belief in which is being justified, insofar as it is no part of the theory (or perhaps of any reasonable theory) that justified belief requires also metajustified belief. This is probably a more plausible version of the demand for metajustification, though it should be noted that on this picture, assuming that the arguments from generality and modality above are correct, rationalism will come out in better shape than empiricism from the very beginning when confronted with the demand for metajustification. As I have formulated the matter in the text here, more work still has to be done.}

The problem of metajustification is that for any source of first order justification (perception, memory, discursive reasoning etc.) $S$, metajustification for beliefs based on that source will either appeal to $S$ itself or it won’t. If the metajustification for $S$ appeals to $S$ itself, then it is circular. If it does not, then it must appeal to some other source of justification $S^*$ in order to metajustify first-order beliefs based on $S$. The attempt to avoid circularity by appealing to some other source of justification $S^*$ raises problems in different ways for different accounts of justification.

The attempt to avoid circularity creates a problem for strict versions of empiricism because the most likely candidate for $S^*$ is a priori justification itself. But for a strict empiricist, who maintains that there is only empirical justification, appealing to any other source of justification amounts to abandoning strict empiricism. This fact has been taken by many to be a telling one against the strict empiricist position.\footnote{Bealer, “The Incoherence of Empiricism”; Bonjour, \textit{In Defense of Pure Reason}, chapter 3.} Since the empiricist cannot provide a non-question begging account of justification for belief in their own position that does not at the same time appeal to some other source of justification, and so falsify the central tenant of strict empiricism, strict empiricism must be false (or some kind of skepticism must be true).

However, Casullo has argued that the attempt to avoid metajustificatory circularity also creates a problem for rationalism. The most likely candidate for $S^*$ on a rationalist account will
be empirical justification. But if empirical reasons are appealed to in order to provide metajustification for beliefs based on rational insight, then all of the problems that arose for strict empiricism at the level of first-order beliefs, the generality problem and the problem of justifying belief in propositions with modal content, will re-emerge at the level of metajustification. This will either require another appeal to a priori justification, effectively resulting in a larger justificatory circle, or appealing to some third source of epistemic justification, S**, which will itself have to overcome the initial problem of metajustification. Thus, Casullo contends, metajustification is just as much a problem for rationalist as for empiricist accounts of justification.21

Given this, a defender of the rationalist position has two options. Either provide a non-circular account of rationalist metajustification that preserves the integrity of the rationalist position, or provide compelling reasons why it is appropriate to demand metajustification as a condition on empiricist but not on rationalist accounts of justification. In the next section I will develop a rationalist response to the problem of metajustification along the lines of the second option.

3. Asymmetry in the Applicability of Skeptical Arguments to A Priori and Empirical Justification

I take Casullo’s point about metajustification for rationalism to be essentially correct. The prospects of providing a non-circular account of metajustification for rationalism that does not simply move the problem back a step seem slim. However, as I have already suggested, it is important to raise the question of whether or not it makes sense to require metajustification for rationalist accounts. My contention is that it does not.

For any basic account of justification, whether rationalist, empiricist or some other, the question of metajustification arises because the account of justification given seems somehow insufficient to guarantee that beliefs formed on the basis of the criteria that it provides will be true or likely to be true. Metajustification is sought precisely when an account of basic justification leaves some doubt or skeptical possibility open as to whether or not beliefs formed on the basis of it really are justified. My contention is that empiricist accounts do, while

21 Casullo, “The Coherence of Empiricism”, 32—33. Once again, however, it is important to note that the scenario works this way only if basic justification for a belief that P is essentially dependent on possession of metajustification for believing that the reason for believing that P makes the truth of P likely. If the metajustification condition were less exacting, or if it were formulated differently it would, among other things, be less clear to what extent empirical metajustification for basically justified a priori belief would necessarily impugn their status as genuinely a priori.
rationalist accounts do not, allow for the possibility of justified skeptical doubts as to whether or not the accounts of justification that they respectively offer really are adequate. The reason for this is that whatever justification a subject has for believing in skepticism about the existence of a priori justification will itself be a priori in nature. Thus the very skeptical doubt that would motivate the demand for metajustification does not even get off the ground, and so it is plausible to suggest that the demand is simply misplaced. Alternatively, no analogous state of affairs holds for empiricism. It is possible to be justified in doubting whether or not empiricist justification really is a legitimate source of justification, and therefore the metajustification requirement remains pertinent. I will illustrate these points by providing two skeptical arguments, the first against empiricist justification, and the second against rationalist justification, and then by commenting on each. Careful consideration of these arguments will make clear the asymmetry between the two accounts of justification.

However, two comments are in order before I provide the skeptical arguments themselves. First, the kind of skepticism I am concerned with here is the kind that, based on reasonable suppositions, possibilities and arguments, could or would convince an individual who carefully considered the matter that some or all of her beliefs may in fact lack justification. I am thus concerned with skeptical arguments that can be formulated, accepted or rejected by a solitary reasoning individual; not with the sort of dialectical argument that might take place between two individuals, the skeptic and the believer in epistemic justification, where the first dogmatically insists on the non-existence of justified belief regardless of what the second says.

Second, I am here concerned primarily with skepticism about justification, not with skepticism about knowledge. The skeptical arguments that I consider will thus follow the more or less standard format of presenting i) an intuitively justified belief, ii) the closure principle for justification, and iii) a skeptical possibility that the subject is intuitively not justified in denying, where a straightforward application of modus tollens results in the denial of justification to the originally intuitively justified belief. I will present a skeptical argument of this general format first against empiricism, then rationalism, and will comment on each.

A skeptical argument against empiricist justification can be formulated as follows,
P1) G. E. Moore is not justified in believing that “I am not a brain in a vat.”
P1*) G. E. Moore is justified in believing that “it is possible that G. E. Moore is a brain in a vat.”
P2) “I have two hands” implies “I am not a brain in a vat” and G.E. Moore is justified in believing this.22

P3) G. E. Moore is justified in believing the Closure Principle for Justification: “If a subject is justified in believing P, and P logically implies ~Q and the subject is justified in believing this, then the subject is or is in a position to be justified in believing ~Q.”

C) G. E. Moore is not justified in believing “I have two hands.”

If G. E. Moore is justified, based on perception, in believing “I have two hands”, then by (P2) and (P3) G. E. Moore should also be justified in believing “I am not a brain in a vat” (on the assumption that brains in vats do not have hands). But since G. E. Moore is both justified in believing that “it is possible that I am a brain in a vat” (P1*) and is not justified in believing that “I am not a brain in a vat” (P1), the conclusion (C) that G. E. Moore is not justified in believing “I have two hands” follows. Further, for any particular belief based on perception, and thus justified on empirical grounds, it will be possible to formulate an argument of this basic form that calls into question the justification of that belief, thus perception as a legitimate source of epistemic justification is itself called into question.23

A skeptical argument against rationalist justification, similar in form to the argument just given, can be formulated as follows,

P1) Descartes is not justified in believing that “It’s impossible that there is an evil deceiver who so arranges things that some proposition is both true and false.”

P1*) Descartes is justified in believing that “It is possible that there is an evil deceiver who so arranges things that some propositions are both true and false.”

P2) “Necessarily, no proposition is both true and false” implies “It’s impossible that there is an evil deceiver who so arranges things that some proposition is both true and false” and Descartes is justified in believing this.

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22 Or at any rate, “I have two hands” and “brains in vats do not have hands” implies “I am not a brain in a vat”.

23 The only novelty in this skeptical argument is the explicit introduction of (P1*). However I take it that no skeptical argument would ever get off the ground if the subject for whom it was an argument did not believe herself to be in possession of some kind of reason to believe that the skeptical hypothesis was itself possibly true. It is only if G. E. Moore has some reason for believing that he could be a brain in a vat that he can fail to be justified in believing that he is not. Indeed, what better defeater for the claim that “I am not justified in believing that I am not a brain in a vat” for a given subject could there be, than for that subject to come to the realization that she is justified in believing that “It is impossible for anything to be a brain in a vat”? Thus, though it is not formally necessary for the argument to go through, I include (P1*) in order to fully capture the epistemic situation of a subject for whom this argument might be a proof.
P3) Descartes is justified in believing the Closure Principle for Justification: “If a subject is justified in believing P, and P logically implies ~Q and the subject is justified in believing this, then that subject is or is in a position to be justified in believing ~Q.”

C) Descartes is not justified in believing that “necessarily no proposition is both true and false.”

As in the previous argument against empiricist justification, this argument begins with a belief that intuitively seems to be justified on a priori grounds (Descartes’ belief in the law of non-contradiction), and formulates a skeptical hypothesis (P1* & P1) such that, in conjunction with the closure principle for epistemic justification (P3) and modus tollens, the subject is not really justified in believing the original proposition (in this case, the law of non-contradiction). A similar argument could be formulated for any proposition belief in which appears to be justified a priori, and thus a priori justification as a legitimate source of epistemic justification is itself called into question.²⁴ It is here, however, that the asymmetry between skeptical arguments against empirical and a priori justification begins to become clear.

In the skeptical argument against empiricism, the key premises, epistemologically speaking, are (P3) the closure principle for justification, and (P1*) G. E. Moore being justified in the belief that “it’s possible that I am a brain in a vat.” The skeptical dilemma would not arise if the closure principle was rejected, and G. E. Moore would have no reason for thinking he might be a brain in a vat (P1) unless he had some reason to believe in the possibility that he could be (P1*).²⁵ The most important thing about these crucial premises is that whatever justification G. E. Moore or any other subject has for believing in them, and hence for believing in the skeptical argument against empiricist justification, will be a priori in nature. The closure principle is a highly general principle concerning epistemic justification, and in light of the discussion of the generality argument provided above, it seems clear that it is not the sort of proposition belief in which could be justified based on perceptual experience alone. The proposition “it is possible that G. E. Moore is a brain in a vat” is a straightforwardly modal proposition and, assuming that G. E. Moore has never seen an actual brain in a vat, the only justification he or anyone else could have for believing that it is true is a priori in nature, requiring as it does consideration of how things could be on other possible worlds. Additionally, recognition of the validity of the

²⁴ As in the previous argument, (P1*) here is an extra premise that is not formally required but that I believe helps to render explicit the epistemic situation of the subject for whom this argument might be a proof.
²⁵ The epistemic principle at work here would seem to go like this. In order for S to be justified in believing that P, S must also be justified in believing that P is indeed possible. Alternatively, if S is not justified in believing that P is possible, then S cannot be justified in believing P to be true (actual).
skeptical argument itself, whether based on application of the inference rule modus tollens or on some more direct rational intuition of its validity, is also justified, if at all, on a priori grounds. Thus it is possible to have justified skeptical doubts about the veracity of empirical justification as such precisely because justification for belief in the key premises of the skeptical argument against it is a priori, not empirical in nature.26

Just as in the skeptical argument against empiricist justification, so in the skeptical argument against rationalist justification the key premises are (P1), (P1*) and also (P3). However, since justified belief in these premises, as well as in the validity of the skeptical argument against rationalist justification itself, will be a priori in nature, a sort of paradox arises: belief in the skeptical argument against a priori justification can itself be justified, if at all, only on a priori grounds. Unlike the skeptical argument against empirical justification where it is possible to doubt the legitimacy of empirical justification as such on a priori grounds, justified belief in the skeptical argument against rationalist justification itself requires that rational intuition or insight be a legitimate form of epistemic justification.27

Thus skeptical doubts about the legitimacy of a priori justification cannot even be formulated without presupposing its veracity, and so it seems that the demand for metajustification is misplaced insofar as there is not really serious room for skeptical doubt about a priori justification to begin with, or at least not for skeptical doubt of the sort that arises for empiricism. It is here that a response to the problem of metajustification for rationalism is to be found. While Casullo is correct to contend that rationalism can no more provide a non-circular account of metajustification than can empiricism, he is incorrect to assume that the demand itself applies to both positions with equal force. Since the formulation of skeptical doubts about rationalist justification cannot even get off the ground without presupposing its veracity, the

26 Here a strict empiricist might point out that if formulating skepticism against empiricism can only be achieved by appealing to certain a priori justified beliefs, then this is all the more reason to be a strict empiricist. Strict empiricism comes out looking like a position that, if true, cannot be objected to on skeptical grounds. The cost of such a move, however, is to accept that no beliefs in principles of logical inference, in propositions with modal content or in generalizations based on induction can be justified; and this is a price that seems too high to pay in order to avoid skepticism. Indeed, it amounts to skepticism about all but the most basic perceptual beliefs.

27 It is important here to distinguish between skepticism about the justification of belief in a specific proposition, such as “I have two hands” and skepticism about the justification of beliefs based a kind or source of justification, such as perception or discursive reasoning. The point here is that both kinds of skepticism can be coherently formulated against empiricism, thus calling empiricist justification itself into question, whereas only particular a priori justified beliefs can be called into question by skeptical arguments, not the legitimacy of a priori justification itself. This may require the formulation of a fallibilist account of a priori justification, along the lines already proposed by Bonjour in In Defense of Pure Reason, chapter four, but it does not call into question the legitimacy of a priori justification itself as a kind or source of justification.
motivation for requiring metajustification in the first place is lacking for rationalism in a way that it is not for empiricism. Thus, metajustification is a problem for empiricist accounts of justification, a problem that can be solved, if at all, only on a priori grounds, whereas it is not a problem for rationalism because the reasons for requesting it are absent. It follows that, whatever other problems rationalism may be subject to, it does seem to fare better with regard to the problem of metajustification than does empiricism.

An objection that might be raised against the argument that I have just provided is the following: it could be argued that the asymmetry that I have drawn between empiricism and rationalism is not really fair in so far as the skeptical argument against empiricism succeeds only by appealing to premises that are justified, if at all, on a priori grounds. But, since the strict empiricist denies the existence of such sources of justification, it is not dialectically fair to appeal to them in structuring a skeptical argument against empiricism. I am willing to concede that this feature of my argument most likely does, to some extent, distort the genuine epistemic position of a strict empiricist. However, assuming that what I have said about the rationalist position holds, then it seems that there are three possible ways of thinking about how the skeptical argument against strict empiricism, when justification is requested for belief in it on strict empiricist grounds, could go.

The first is the way I have suggested, with the skeptical argument against empiricism being justified a priori, but showing that empiricist sources of justification do require metajustification.

The second would be to say that, in so far as the generality and modal arguments against empiricism that were considered earlier are sound, the skeptical argument against empiricism cannot be formulated, thus vindicating empiricism from the possibility of genuine skeptical doubts against beliefs based on it, and thus also from the demand for metajustification. It is crucial to note, however, that this move comes at the price of acknowledging the soundness of the generality and modal arguments against empiricism. Thus avoiding issues of skepticism and metajustification for the strict empiricist comes at the cost of embracing skepticism about belief in propositions that are general (or “experience transcending”, going beyond immediate observations or sets of these) or modal in character, or both, which is a high epistemological price to pay.
The third and final option would be to contend that for the strict empiricist, epistemic justification for belief in the premises and validity of the skeptical argument is available, if at all, only by appealing to empirical sources of justification, thus rendering justified belief in skeptical arguments against empiricism self-undermining in the same way that it is for rationalism, and so negating the demand for metajustification in both cases. But this third option is simply unavailable to the empiricist so long as the generality and modality arguments offered above are both sound, as I have maintained. Indeed, it seems that the very nature of strict empiricism renders this third option unavailable.

Thus, whether it is fair to motivate the demand for metajustification against strict empiricism by launching a priori justified skeptical arguments against it, or whether these must be abandoned insofar as appeal to empirical justification alone cannot support either general or modal beliefs, it seems that rationalism, whatever other problems it may have, still comes out ahead regarding the issue of metajustification.
Bibliography