

DEFENDING THE REFUTATION OF IDEALISM

Jeffrey McDonough
Syracuse University

In his massive *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, Paul Guyer attributes to Kant an anti-skeptical argument directed at the foundations of Cartesian skepticism.¹ The argument would show that the skeptic's suggestion that she might have a rich knowledge of her own mental life while lacking any knowledge of the external world is incoherent because knowledge of the self presupposes knowledge of an external world. Guyer claims that the argument both stands at the center of Kant's work in theoretical philosophy, and that it is capable of sustaining even the interest of contemporary epistemologists.²

Interestingly, the latter half of Guyer's claim has met with more resistance than the former. Anthony Brueckner begins his article "The Anti-Skeptical Epistemology of the Refutation of Idealism" by conceding that "Guyer...presents strong evidence for believing that his reconstruction of the Refutation is faithful to Kant's sophisticated, considered intentions," but nonetheless concludes with the "depressing conclusion" that "The Refutation of Idealism, read *à la* Guyer...offers no solace to opponents of skepticism."³ Likewise, in her review of *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, Patricia Kitcher suggests that Guyer's reading of the Refutation is more promising as an account of Kant's best laid plans than as a contemporary response to skepticism. Emphasizing the positive, she writes, "While I have some quibbles about whether this reasoning is as solid as Guyer suggests...he has produced an extremely plausible account of what Kant at least *hoped* to accomplish in the Refutation."⁴ Jonathan Vogel similarly concedes that Guyer's argument does "much to illuminate Kant's thinking," but nonetheless claims that "Guyer's argument preserves, rather than fills, the apparent gap in the original Refutation."⁵

In the following essay, the prospects for defending Guyer's reading of the Refutation as a contemporary response to skepticism are explored in greater detail. The first section reconstructs Guyer's complex argument in three steps and gives it a quasi-formal presentation. That presentation reveals what appears to be the weakest premise in Guyer's master argument, namely, that judgments concerning the temporal order of one's own mental states cannot be made on the basis of psychological laws governing those states. The second section proposes a more thoroughly epistemological

defense of that premise than is found in Guyer's work: Although the mind might be governed by its own psychological laws, the Cartesian's concept of knowledge requires the skeptic to deny that those laws could justify claims to knowledge about the temporal order of the self.

I

Guyer's own presentation of his master argument tracks carefully the many bends and twists in the development of Kant's theoretical philosophy. In considering its contemporary interest, however, it may be more helpful to think of it as emerging from a series of three interrelated steps.

The first step, grounded in Kant's analogies, reveals three limitations on our ability to determine the objective order of represented events. (1) We cannot simply read off objective order from the intrinsic features of our mental representations. To borrow Guyer's example, our mental representations are not like sports broadcasts with digital timers in their corners.⁶ (2) Nor can the order of represented events be directly read off from the order of their representations. For although the order in which we experience our representations is always successive, the order of the events they represent is not always successive.⁷ Nothing bars my first remembering my fiftieth birthday and then remembering my fifth. (3) But, nor do we have any more direct access to represented events or their temporal order. If we are to think about the objective order of any series of events, we must do so *via* our representational states.

In this Kantian context it will be worth noting that these limitations need not be thought to apply to all cognitive beings. Perhaps, for example, God's mental representations do, or could, come (as it were) with digital timers in their corners. All that is necessary for Guyer's master argument is that if (1)-(3) are contingent limitations on our representative faculties, they are contingent limitations which are shared, and will be conceded, even by the skeptic.

The second step of Guyer's master argument draws the consequence of Kant's second analogy: The limitations of our representative faculties entail that the determination of the objective order of represented events is dependent upon constraining principles which effectively limit the possible orderings of the events which they represent.⁸ Without such principles nothing could speak in favor of assigning one temporal order to an objective series rather than another. Suppose, for example, I have the representational series '(i) the lighting of a fuse - (ii) explosion'. Without appeal to limiting principles, the temporal order the represented events is left wholly undeter-

mined: (i) could be a representation of a future event; (ii) could be a memory of a long past event, *etc.* Only in a constraining web of extralogical rules—for example, that fuse lightings cause explosions—can we even begin to have justified beliefs about the objective order of events represented by our mental states.

The third step applies the lessons of the first two steps to the empirical self. The empirical self might be thought of as an ordered series of representations, the whole of which is never immediately present to us, but which must be reconstructed, in whole or in part, from our current representations. In representing the empirical self, however, we bump up against the same limitations faced in representing any other objective series. We have no more immediate access to the objective order of represented states of the self than we do of any other object. Taken by itself, my representational series '(i) headache - (ii) departmental meeting' does not reveal whether I had a headache before, during or after a departmental meeting. Assigning a definite temporal order even to states of the self is thus dependent upon principles that effectively limit the possible orderings of the states represented.

From these three steps Guyer's argument would establish the conclusion of the Refutation—that the mere, but empirically determined self, presupposes knowledge of the external world.⁹ For ease of exposition let's call the constraining principles of steps two and three "laws," and allow "P" to stand for "a mental sequence proposition," "JP" for "S is justified in believing P," and "E" for "evidence." Guyer's argument might then be formulated as follows:

- P1) If JP then P is either entirely foundational or is justified, at least in part, on the basis of some evidence E.
- P2) P cannot be entirely foundational.
- P3) If JP then P is justified, at least in part, on the basis of E.
- P4) E must be either psychological laws or non-psychological laws.
- P5) E is not psychological laws.
- P6) If JP and on the basis of E, then E is non-psychological laws.
- P7) If JP and on the basis of E, then JE.
- P8) Assume JP
- C) JE

Ignoring for now the fifth premise, the seven other premises of Guyer's master argument seem reasonably safe. The first appears to follow without controversy from the definition of "foundational". The second from the earlier concession that we, in fact, cannot directly read off the temporal order

of our own mental states. The third premise follows from P1 and P2 by disjunctive syllogism. The fourth from the earlier concession that the lessor of the second analogy applies equally well to the empirical self and so assigning a definite temporal order even to states of the self is dependent upon extralogical principles which effectively limit the possible orderings of represented states. The sixth premise follows from P4 and P5 by disjunctive syllogism. The seventh premise is plausibly an epistemological truism¹⁰ and the eighth is the key premise granted by the non-dogmatic skeptic.¹¹

The argument as a whole attempts to build on Kant's insight that—at least for beings like ourselves—a great deal more is involved having knowledge of the objective order of represented events than might be expected. Such knowledge, in particular, presupposes knowledge of (or at least justified belief in) crucial extra-logical rules capable of eliminating otherwise possible interpretations. If it can be shown that those rules must be laws governing events in the external world—if Guyer's fifth premise can be defended—clearly we will be well on our way to a powerful response to any skeptic willing to grant self-knowledge, but unwilling to allow that we have knowledge of the external world. The next section takes up the prospects for such a defense.

II

In *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, Guyer suggests no less than three distinct arguments which might be developed in defense of his fifth premise. Following the lead of Kant's early work the *Nova Delucidatio*, all three arguments attempt to show that psychological laws cannot justify beliefs about the objective order of mental states because psychological laws are themselves *metaphysically impossible*.

As one might expect, that claim is exceedingly difficult to defend, and contemporary philosophers have good reason to be leery of it. Fortunately, it also seems more than is necessary to complete Guyer's master argument. For the argument does not require the impossibility of psychological laws, but only that—even by the skeptic's own lights—they cannot serve as the constraining principles necessary for self-knowledge.

In developing a more thoroughly epistemological defense of Guyer's fifth premise, we should no more hope to draw our arguments from thin air than did Kant. The Refutation, after all, explicitly does not attempt to argue against the dogmatic skeptic unwilling to grant any footholds at all. Instead it attempts to show inconsistency from (1) epistemic principles which even

the skeptic might plausibly find inescapable (e.g. that knowledge of temporal order presupposes knowledge of limiting laws); together with (2) minimal concessions which we may reasonably expect even the skeptic to grant (e.g. that we do not have immediate awareness of the temporal order of represented events).

Following the spirit of the Refutation, rather than Kant's conviction that psychological laws are impossible, we can construct a brief lemma supporting Guyer's fifth premise. In order to do so, however, we will need to first revisit some, perhaps familiar, themes implicit in the skeptic's denial of claims to external world knowledge.

In denying that we have knowledge of an external world, the skeptic does not, of course, try to directly impugn our epistemic faculties or show a discrepancy between our beliefs and those of a would be ideal observer. Instead she posits various skeptical hypotheses—that we might be the dupes of an evil demon, or brains in vats, etc.¹² In the face of such hypotheses she suggests that, although our common sense beliefs about the external world may be perfectly accurate, they are no longer epistemically permitted. To go on believing that we are sitting warm by the fire in our pajamas, without first proving that we are not systematically mistaken about events in the external world, would be something akin to intellectual recklessness.

The skeptic thus appears to share with many contemporary epistemologists what has been called the "guidance-deontological conception of justification (GD)".¹³ As the name suggests, GD involves two aspects: (1) that justification is closely tied to the activity of deciding what to believe or not to believe; (2) that it is connected with belief formation by way of intellectual duty or obligation.

Both aspects of GD have come in for criticism by contemporary epistemologists. The first has, for example, been challenged on the grounds that it depends on doxastic voluntarism.¹⁴ The second has been criticized both for its apparent dependence on the first and on independent grounds. It has, for example, been suggested that one might fulfill all of one's epistemic duties in believing that *p*, but nonetheless fail to be justified in believing that *p*.¹⁵

The tenability of GD, however, need not concern us here. More important for us is the connection between GD and the sorts of evidence that might justify claims to knowledge. Alvin Goldman has recently emphasized this connection. Borrowing William Alston's term "justifier," for facts or states of affairs that determine the justificational status of beliefs, he writes:

It seems to follow naturally from the GD conception of justification that a certain constraint must be placed on the sorts of facts or states of affairs

that qualify as justifiers... the facts that make you justified or unjustified in believing a certain proposition at a given time must be facts that you are capable of knowing, at that time, to hold or not to hold. There is an intimate connection, then, between the GD conception of justification and the requirement that justifiers must be accessible to, or knowable by, the agent at the time of belief.¹⁶

An accessibility requirement is thus a natural consequence of the GD conception of justification. In so far as justification is connected to making responsible decisions about what to believe or not to believe, it is the evidence one has or could have that is relevant.

For the Cartesian skeptic, however, an accessibility requirement is more than just a natural consequence of her concept of justification. For her skeptical argument depends implicitly on a fairly strong accessibility requirement. Unless evidence is limited to facts readily available to us, there is no way of driving a wedge between self-knowledge and knowledge of the external world short of showing that, in fact, our epistemic faculties are unreliable or that our beliefs are at odds with those of a would be ideal observer. The strategy of using skeptical hypotheses to leverage doubt from mere possibility would thus be ruined without a fairly strong accessibility requirement.

Having revisited a few familiar themes implicit in the skeptic's denial of external world knowledge, we are ready to construct a brief lemma in support of Guyer's fifth premise. The first step involves little more than simply highlighting an immediate consequence of the skeptic's own accessibility requirement: in considering the sorts of evidence which may be counted by the skeptic as relevant to claims to knowledge, we need only consider those to which we have adequate access or awareness. Thus it is not necessary to show that psychological laws are themselves impossible. For if Kant is correct in suggesting that the objective ordering of states of the self is dependent upon constraining laws, the metaphysical impossibility of psychological laws will almost certainly turn out to be besides the point. For by the skeptic's own lights, psychological laws could only be important in justifying our claims to knowledge about the temporal order of the self if they were accessible in a fairly strong sense.

The second step will now be obvious. For it seems reasonable to suppose that even a skeptic will grant that—just as we do not have immediate knowledge of the temporal order of our own mental states—we certainly do not have any awareness of psychological laws governing the ordering of our mental states. There is no psychological equivalent to the set of physical regularities found, for example, in Newton's physics. Indeed, unless we

think of the mind as the brain, or as functional processes of the brain, and thereby assume the denial of Cartesian skepticism, we do not even have any clear idea as to what such a set of laws would look like. And, of course that fits nicely with the general thrust of Guyer's reconstruction of the Refutation. Knowledge of the temporal order of represented events—whether those events are external or internal—requires knowledge of restrictive laws. But the only laws that can fit the bill—indeed the only laws of which we have any comprehensive and systematic account—are laws which must be supposed to govern events in the external world.

Putting our two steps together into the format used earlier, we can now state the following lemma in support of Guyer's fifth premise:

P1) If JP and on the basis of E, then we have immediate access to, or direct awareness of, E.

P2) We do not have immediate access to, nor direct awareness of, robust psychological laws governing our own mental states.

C) (If JP and on the basis of E) E is not psychological laws.

It should not, of course, be objected that our ignorance of robust psychological laws is perhaps merely a contingent fact about our current state of understanding. For, as we have already seen, in the context of the Refutation, we needn't be overly shy of contingency. The fact that our mental states do not have intrinsic time markings is arguably a contingent fact about our faculties of representation. And the most crucial premise of the argument—that we indeed have self-knowledge—is manifestly contingent. Although the Refutation does not offer us a sharp criterion for deciding the permissibility of candidate premises, clearly the demand that they be necessary would be too strong.

Nor should it be objected that our grasp of physical laws is not sufficient to help ground judgments of temporal order, and thus that Kant's argument, if it were accepted, would only push us further into skepticism. For Kant's argument is not intended to show that we in fact do have knowledge of the external world or of anything else. Its goal is only to show that the skeptical view that we have clear knowledge of our own mental lives, but no knowledge of what lies beyond, is untenable. That untenability may, of course, drive different people in different directions—some towards more expansive skepticism, some towards a reexamination of the foundations of Cartesian skepticism. The Refutation only seeks to show that an influential epistemic picture is flawed; it would be a mistake to fault that critique because it does not force one particular alternative picture upon us.

Conclusion

Contemporary epistemologists have dismissed too quickly Guyer's reconstruction of Kant's Refutation of Idealism. It is the most convincing attempt yet to follow Kant's suggestion that once we see how much is involved in even self-knowledge, we will also see that self-knowledge presupposes knowledge of the external world. Although Guyer's own attempts to defend the key premise of his master argument perhaps follows too closely Kant's conviction that the mind cannot be governed by robust psychological laws, his argument can be defended on the basis of the more modest claim that, although robust psychological laws are themselves possible, they still cannot justify our claims to self-knowledge.¹⁷

Notes

¹ Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See especially, "Part IV: The refutation of idealism," pp. 279-332.

² See, for example, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, pp. 32, 44, 427-8.

³ Anthony Brueckner, "The Anti-Skeptical Epistemology of the Refutation of Idealism," *Philosophical Topics* 19 (1991), pp. 31, 44.

⁴ Patricia Kitcher, "Kant's Patchy Epistemology," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 68 (1987), p. 314. Emphasis added.

⁵ Jonathan Vogel, "The Problem of Self-Knowledge in Kant's "Refutation of Idealism: Two Recent Views," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4 (1993), pp. 1, 11.

⁶ *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

⁷ Cf. Kant's famous remark that, "The apprehension of the manifold of appearance is always successive. The representations of the parts follow one another. Whether they also follow each other in the object is a further point for reflection, which is not contained in the first." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), p. A189/B234.

⁸ Kant writes, "Since the subjective succession by itself is altogether arbitrary, it does not prove anything as to the manner in which the manifold is connected in the object. The objective succession will therefore consist in that order of the manifold of appearance according to which, *in conformity with a rule*, the apprehension of that which happens follows upon the apprehension of that which precedes. Thus only can I be justified in asserting, not merely of my apprehension, but of appearance itself, that a succession is to be met with in it." *Critique of Pure Reason*, *op. cit.*, p. A193/B238.

⁹ The stated thesis of the Refutation reads, "The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me." *Critique of Pure Reason*, *op. cit.*, p. B275.

¹⁰ Truisms can, of course, be challenged. But the claim of this essay is only that Guyer has exposed an argument worthy of contemporary interest, not that it is ironclad. If the seventh premise were the weakest link in his chain of argument, it is difficult to imagine how it could not be judged to be worthy of contemporary interest.

¹¹ The label "non-dogmatic skeptic," of course, alludes to Kant's distinction between what he calls the "problematic idealism" of Descartes and the "dogmatic idealism" of Berkeley. Of the key premise, Kant writes, "The required proof must, therefore, show that we have experience, and not merely imagination of outer things; and this, it would seem, cannot be achieved save by proof that even our inner experience, which for Descartes is indubitable, is possible only on the assumption of outer experience." *Critique of Pure Reason*, *op. cit.*, p. B274-5.

¹² For evil demons see Descartes' "First Mediation," *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp. 12-15. For brains in vats, see Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 1-21.

¹³ I borrow the term from Alvin Goldman. See his "Internalism Exposed," *The Journal of Philosophy* XCVI, number 6 (June, 1999), p. 272.

¹⁴ For a development of this line of criticism see William Alston's "The Deontological Conception of Justification," reprinted in his *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) pp. 115-152. For responses to criticism based on doxastic voluntarism, see Richard Feldman's, "Epistemic Obligations," in J. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. II (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1988) pp. 235-56; and John Heil's, "Doxastic Agency," *Philosophical Studies*, XL (1983) pp. 355-64.

¹⁵ See, Alston, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹⁶ Goldman, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

¹⁷ I would like to thank Jose Benardete, John Hawthorne, and Pierre LeMorvan for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank the organizers and participants of the 62nd Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Philosophical Society for a wonderful weekend of philosophy, and especially Hoke Robinson for his insightful comments given at the conference.