EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

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Epistemic relativism rejects the idea that claims can be assessed from a universally applicable, objective standpoint. It is greatly disdained because it suggests that the real 'basis' for our views is something fleeting, such as "the techniques of mass persuasion" (Thomas Kuhn 1970) or the determination of intellectuals to achieve "solidarity" (Rorty 1984) or "keep the conversation going" (Rorty 1979). But epistemic relativism, like skepticism, is far easier to despise than to convincingly refute, for two main reasons. First, its definition is unclear, so we cannot always tell where relativism leaves off and other views, such as skepticism or subjectivism, begin. Consequently, it can be difficult to tell when a criticism has done enough. Second, the grounds for relativism are unclear, which can make it hard to know how to attack it or whether we have dismantled all of the ways of supporting it.

As I see it, the case for epistemic relativism involves (one form of) skepticism, and cannot be defeated satisfactorily unless we simultaneously deny it the skeptical resources upon which it draws. And that is not something we can do unless we challenge beliefs lying deep in the heart of mainstream epistemological thought. To defend epistemic absolutism, I will argue, we must move closer to skepticism and relativism, without succumbing to either.[1]

I'll start by clarifying epistemic relativism and its relation to some allied doctrines.

Epistemic Relativism Defined; Subjectivism and Skepticism

Relativism is best defined in contrast to absolutism, which comes in two forms. The first, *ontological* or *truth* absolutism, says there is a single,

objectively true characterization of reality, at least in its broadest outlines. Of course, different aspects of reality will receive different accounts: the color of the proverbial elephant is one thing, while its shape is quite another. But at least one of two substantially distinct accounts of (the whole elephant or) the whole of reality must be false. It is likely, let us add, that no existing person's account of reality fully coincides with the true and complete account. The second form of absolutism, *epistemic* absolutism, says there is only one correct or authoritative fundamental standard (comprised, perhaps, of component standards) for assessing epistemic merit (although possibly no existing person has adopted it in its entirety). Ultimately, this standard determines the epistemic appropriateness of beliefs and of rules for adopting beliefs. However, quite possibly two competing beliefs (or rules) will be equally justified, or equally unjustified, according to the authoritative standard, leaving us unable to settle some disputes on a rational basis.

Relativism is the denial of absolutism. In one form, it denies ontological absolutism; in another, it denies epistemic absolutism. *Ontological relativism* denies that there is but one objectively correct characterization of reality, while *epistemic relativism* denies that there is only one correct epistemic standard. Ontological relativism can appear in a *subjectivist* form, denying that there is any correct account of reality, or in a *pluralist* form, averring that there are many correct accounts. Ontological relativism is not the claim that any account of reality is made using, or relative to, the concepts involved in the account itself—that claim is a mere truism that everyone, including absolutists, grants. Similarly, epistemic relativism should be distinguished from the truism that assessments of the merit of claims must be made relative to some standard or another.

I will say nothing further about the ontological variety of relativism. My target is the *epistemic* variety.[2]

Epistemic relativism can take either of two forms, since there are two camps of people who deny that there is only one authoritative fundamental epistemic standard. Those in the first camp, *subjectivist* epistemic relativists, say that there is *no* correct (authoritative) epistemic standard, and that epistemic merit is always assessed relative to standards that are entirely subjective. Those in the second camp, *pluralist* epistemic relativists, say that there is *more than one* correct (authoritative) fundamental epistemic standard: the assessment of epistemic merit is relative to a range of competing standards, each applied in exclusion of the others (to avoid an incoherent hodgepodge), and each objectively correct (in some sense which the pluralist must eventually supply).

The relationships among epistemic relativism, subjectivism and skepticism are complicated because each view comes in various varieties. Consider some points of contact.

Relativism and subjectivism. subjectivist relativism is closely related to s*tandard subjectivism*, which denies that any epistemic standards are objectively correct. Subjectivism says that an epistemic standard's claim to acceptability is wholly contingent upon the features of an individual subject. Epistemic standards are like the 'guidelines' for matters of taste: they apply only to those who accept them. Subjectivist relativists accept standard subjectivism, adding only that accepted subjective standards vary from person to person or from group to group. However, subjectivism is incompatible with pluralist relativism.

Skepticism and subjectivist relativism. Standard subjectivism (and hence subjectivist relativism) implies the *radical* skeptical position that no beliefs are justified. At the same time, however, subjectivism undercuts the *strong* skeptical view that all claims are irrational and should be abandoned, for an assessment of the *epistemic* merit of a view, pro or con, can be made only against the backdrop of an authoritative standard; if none exists, as subjectivists say, then no view is defensible, but neither can any view be condemned as irrational. Neither form of skepticism implies standard subjectivism: radical and strong skepticism are compatible with the possibility that some epistemic standard is correct. Radical skepticism is equivalent to the conditional claim that strong skepticism is true *if* there are authoritative standards. This conditional claim, in turn, is equivalent to the assertion that either standard subjectivism is true or strong skepticism is true.

Pluralist relativism and skepticism. Either (a) no epistemic standards are authoritative, or (b) one is, or (c) many are. Pluralist relativism is consistent only with (c). But if (c) holds, standard subjectivism does not, so radical (and strong) skepticism is true only if every authoritative standard condemns all claims as irrational. Therefore pluralist relativism is compatible with skepticism only if there is more than one authoritative epistemic standard, and each one of them condemns all claims as irrational. Presumably not every standard recognized by a pluralist will be so demanding, and hence the pluralist will reject skepticism as ordinarily understood. However, pluralism is consistent with views related to skepticism, namely *skepticism relative to a given person S*, or the contention that the epistemic standard authoritative for S condemns all claims as irrational, and *pluralist skepticism*, or the view that *an* authoritative epistemic standard condemns all claims as irrational. The former implies the latter but not vice versa. Clearly, neither is traditional skepticism, for each is consistent with the possibility that there are authoritative epistemic standards that *endorse* many claims as rational. Pluralist relativists will accept skepticism relative to S so long as S's standard is too demanding to be met by any claim, and they will accept pluralist skepticism if they accept skepticism relativized to at least one person.[3]

The Argument for Epistemic Relativism

Theorists disagree about how best to defend relativism. Thomas Kuhn suggests that fundamental scientific theories are on a par in that any argument for one against another will inevitably be circular.[4] David Bloor and Barry Barnes (1982) write that relativism "requires what may be called . . . an 'equivalence' postulate. Our equivalence postulate is that all beliefs are on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their credibility."[5] And Harvey Siegel (1987), a resourceful critic, says epistemic relativism is (or is based on) the view that alternative standards for epistemic evaluation are on a par in the sense that there is no neutral way of choosing among them.[6] Instead of assuming that epistemic relativists develop a single line of argument, I will borrow from (and elaborate) various discussions and attempt to put together the strongest case possible. I take ontological absolutism for granted.

I think epistemic relativism is best defended on the basis of the *parity thesis*, which holds that (nearly) all epistemic standards are on a par in that none of them is more defensible than the next. In its broadest outlines the case for relativism looks like this:

1. Many (if not all) epistemic standards can be provided defenses that are as good as the best defense of an epistemic standard: they are on a par (the *parity thesis*).
2. So absolutism is false: there is no one correct (authoritative) standard for assessing the rationality of believers and beliefs (*epistemic relativism*).

Obviously, this initial argument needs development: the parity thesis is unclear and undefended; worse, it does not entail relativism. Let us see what we can do in behalf of the parity thesis. We can worry about deriving relativism later.

The parity thesis admits of two interpretations. On the one hand, standards might be on a par since none are defensible at all. This first option is a form of skepticism directed at epistemic standards. (Of course, skeptics will go on to say that the indefensibility of standards leads to the indefensibility of beliefs). On the other hand, standards would be on a par, even though there is a standard that can be defended well, if the others could be defended equally well. This second option takes a credulous attitude toward standards—an attitude that is just the opposite of skepticism, even though it is usually conflated with skepticism.

In effect, then, the parity thesis is a disjunctive claim, asserting that there is no way to defend any epistemic standard as authoritative (*standard skepticism*), or that virtually any standard can be given a defense that is not

only fully adequate, but as good as the defense of any competitor (*standard credulism*). Therefore, whether this *disjunctive parity thesis* is justifiable depends on whether its disjuncts are defensible. Let us examine each.

The first—asserting standard skepticism—has been embraced by skeptics as far back as the Pyrrhonians on the grounds that any argument we provide for an epistemic standard will involve arbitrariness, circularity, or dialectical deadlock, and that no such defense is any good. They conclude that no standard is adequately defensible, as in the *standard skeptic's argument*, below:

(1) It is rational to use a standard only if it is defensible, and an adequate defense cannot involve circularity, arbitrary assumptions, or dialectical deadlock.
(2) No standard can be defended without circularity, arbitrary assumptions, or dialectical deadlock.
(3) So no standard can be adequately defended as authoritative.

Premise (1) can be called the *defense tenet*. Consider three points about it: first, if pressed to justify it, skeptics would likely say it is implicit in the ordinary notion of rationality—that the opponents of skepticism understand rationality in a way that implies that the tenet is correct, so skeptics need take no steps to make their tenet palatable. Second, the tenet does not require that a standard actually be defended in order for its use to be rational: it must be defens*ible*, not necessarily defend*ed*. Third, the term 'arbitrary' applies to a person's assumption when that person cannot, even after some reflection, associate with it any reason that suggests it is true. A fourth remark clarifies the notion of dialectical deadlock: a *claim* is in dialectical deadlock if it is disputed for intelligible reasons and the controversy has not been resolved on grounds common (or acceptable) to all sides. (E.g., it is deadlocked if one side depends on grounds the other side is committed to rejecting.) An *argument* involves deadlock if it appeals to a deadlocked claim. Such arguments are said to beg the question. Sometimes deadlock (and question begging) cannot be overcome, as in a dispute between a critic and a resourceful solipsist: neither can argue on grounds the other will grant.

The standard skeptic's argument might be attacked on the grounds that its second premise is false, since the skeptic's demands, as stated in their tenet, can be met. We will discuss this strategy later. For now let us suppose that the skeptic's demands cannot be met. Then the only remaining line of attack is to reject the defense tenet. This brings us to standard credulism, whose advocates reject that tenet. They say that, whatever else is true of a conception of rationality that is *correct*—whatever else is true of *the*, or *a*, correct standard of rationality—the one and only adequate way to defend *that standard itself* involves an argument that is circular, or an argument

that relies on assumptions that are arbitrary (or both). And then credulists claim that the same sort of defense is available for a wide range of epistemic standards, each taken in exclusion of all others. The authoritativeness of each is, therefore, equally defensible. (Upon further thought, credulists might insist that a standard have other qualifications to be fully defensible; surely, for example, it must not endorse contradictions. But the additional qualifications cannot be onerous without precluding our defending a standard by arguing circularly or on the basis of arbitrary grounds.) The *credulous argument* spelled out:

1. An epistemic standard that is authoritative can be adequately defended using an argument that is circular or whose premises are arbitrary.
2. If an authoritative epistemic standard can be adequately defended on the basis of an argument that is circular or that invokes arbitrary assumptions, then any standard that can be provided such a supporting argument will be adequately defended.
3. The authoritativeness of virtually any epistemic standard can be supported with an argument that is circular or that invokes arbitrary assumptions.
4. So the authoritativeness of virtually any epistemic standard can be adequately defended.

But if the case for each of a great many standards is as powerful as the next, shouldn't we conclude that we are in no position to select *any* of those standards as authoritative? Indeed, shouldn't we conclude that in the final analysis none is truly defensible, which brings us back to standard skepticism, so that credulism supports skepticism? We should indeed accept this conclusion, if we assume the following *no-ties* principle: if the defense of the authoritativeness of standard T is not better than the defense of the authoritativeness of an alternative to T, then there are inadequate grounds for accepting the authoritativeness of T. However, credulists will not accept this principle, nor the resulting argument that reduces their view to skepticism. Their main position is that a standard resting on arbitrary or circular grounds *is* defended, even though another standard resting on such grounds is defended just as well, so credulists accept defenses that violate the no-ties principle. For similar reasons, they allow for the adequacy of defenses that are in dialectical deadlock: the dispute between advocates of self-supporting standards cannot be settled on grounds common to (or neutral among) all sides. The credulist's view is that a wide range of epistemic standards can be given adequate defenses even though these defenses involve circularity, arbitrariness, dialectical deadlock, or even ties in force.

When we combine the considerations in favor of the skeptical and credulist versions of the parity thesis, and maintain our assumption that the demands skeptics lay out (in their defense tenet) cannot be met, we find

ourselves in the following dilemma: either the conception of rationality most people accept—a conception that entails the defense tenet—is correct or it is not. If it is correct, we cannot defend any standards, since we cannot meet the tenet's demands. But if we alter the commonsense view of rationality so as to sustain the conclusion that some standard—say the one with which we are operating—is defensible, we must conclude that many competing standards are defensible. So we must accept either standard skepticism or standard credulism. To review:

1. Either the defense tenet is correct or not.
2. If it is, no standard is defensible (standard skepticism).
3. If the defense tenet is incorrect, then defenses that are circular, arbitrary or in dialectical deadlock are acceptable, and virtually any epistemic standard is defensible (standard credulism).
4. So standard skepticism or standard credulism is true (the disjunctive parity thesis).

Let us call this argument the *preliminary dilemma*.

Now that we have a defense of the parity thesis, it is time to see whether we can use it to derive relativism. Surprisingly, perhaps, we can come close. Choosing between standard skepticism and standard credulism is much like choosing between subjectivist and pluralist relativism, for the (standard skeptic's) claim that no standard is adequately defensible is much like the subjectivist relativist claim that no standard is authoritative, and the (standard credulist's) claim that any standard can be adequately defended is closely allied to the pluralist relativist claim that all standards are authoritative. The disjunctive parity thesis has placed us at the brink of epistemic relativism.

To get us over the edge, we need grounds for saying two things. The first is that if no standard is defensible, as standard skepticism says, then no standard is authoritative, which is what subjectivist relativism claims. The second is that if nearly any standard is defensible, as standard credulism suggests, then nearly any standard is authoritative, as pluralist relativism says. But what would entitle relativists to make these two claims? The answer, I suggest, is a form of verificationism: implicitly or explicitly, relativists assume that the mark of the correctness of a standard is its defensibility. Perhaps, they reason, we can imagine some authoritative standard that cannot be supported, but if *no* standard can be adequately defended, then no standard is authoritative. Perhaps we can also imagine some epistemic standard that can be justified even though it is not authoritative, but if *many* (or all) standards can be given defenses that are adequate and even as good as the best defense (as good as the defense of an admittedly authoritative standard), then each of those standards is authoritative. The relativists' version of verificationism holds that the indefensibility of all

standards entails that no standard is authoritative, and the defensibility of nearly any standard entails the authoritativeness of those standards.

Hence verificationism converts the choice between standard skepticism and credulism into the choice between subjectivist and pluralist relativism, and we can defend epistemic relativism by supplementing the preliminary dilemma with verificationism, as in the following *pincer argument*:

1. Either the defense tenet is correct or not.
2. If it is, no standard is defensible (standard skepticism).
3. If the defense tenet is incorrect, then defenses that are circular, arbitrary or in dialectical deadlock are acceptable, and virtually any epistemic standard is defensible (standard credulism).
4. So standard skepticism or standard credulism is true (the disjunctive parity thesis).
5. If no standard can be adequately defended, then no standard is authoritative; if virtually any standard can be adequately defended, then any of these defensible standards is authoritative (verificationism).[7]
6. So either no standard is authoritative (subjectivism), or nearly any standard is authoritative, and the correct assessment of epistemic merit varies depending on the standard in play (pluralism). Either way, absolutism is false.

(I will not argue the point here, but Pyrrhonian skeptics[8] seem to have used something like the preliminary dilemma to prepare the way to a pseudo-relativist decision to live "by the appearances." The disjunctive parity thesis does not select between standard skepticism and standard credulism, so Pyrrhonians were not precisely skeptics, not even standard skeptics. Their position resembles relativism, since the disjunctive parity thesis is allied to and consistent with the claim that relativism is true. "Appearances" was their term for what they found themselves inclined to accept, sometimes so forcefully as to be involuntary. Finding themselves so inclined, they adopted their society's customs and beliefs, while acknowledging the epistemic parity of these with ways in other lands.)

One loose end needs attention: is there a case for the verificationist thesis on which relativists rely? Perhaps. Relativists might offer verificationism as the best explanation of the parity thesis—of the fact that either standard skepticism or credulism is correct. Consider standard skepticism. Why, they might ask, is it impossible to show that any standard is authoritative? Certainly it is theoretically possible that some standard is authoritative even though there is no way to tell that it is, but the best explanation of the fact that we cannot find good grounds for saying that a standard is authoritative is that no standard *is* authoritative. Now consider standard credulism. Why can we give many standards an extremely, and equally,

compelling defense? Possibly, none of them is really authoritative, even though we have good grounds for thinking otherwise; possibly, too, only one is authoritative, even though what can be said on its behalf can be said (*mutatis mutandis*) on behalf of alternatives. But the best explanation is that the entire set of standards is authoritative. This defense of verificationism has at least prima facie plausibility.[9]

We now have a strong case against absolutism.[10] Yet absolutism is held in high esteem, and relativism is widely rejected. Are these assessments warranted? There are two main strategies for criticizing relativism. The strategy nearly every critic follows (e.g., Plato in *Theaetetus*) is to argue that it is self-defeating. Now that we have laid out the pincer argument for relativism, we also know there is a second way to assail relativism: we can attack the skeptic's prediction, whose reliability we have been taking for granted, that defending a standard invariably involves circularity, arbitrariness or deadlock. A successful attack would allow us to undermine the pincer argument by rejecting its second premise. In the following section I propose that we continue to accept the skeptic's prediction, and focus on the familiar strategy of criticizing relativism by showing it is self-defeating. Let us ask whether it can succeed on its own, without help from a simultaneous attack on the skeptic's prediction.

The Traditional Argument Against Epistemic Relativism

To show relativism is self-defeating we must argue that it is incoherent, or that the very claim it makes implies that it is not defensible, much like the following statement: This statement cannot be justified. However, the first option is a nonstarter: subjectivist relativism makes the entirely intelligible (if false) claim that no standard is authoritative, while pluralist relativism says, again intelligibly, that many standards are authoritative. How about the other option? Here the strategy is to catch relativists on the horns of the *antirelativist dilemma*, as follows: Relativists must support their view either relatively (i.e., in a way that presupposes the truth of relativism) or non-relatively. However, they cannot support it relatively, since that would (a) beg the question and (b) violate the no-ties principle. Nor can they support it on a non-relative basis, since doing so requires giving it up. They must give up their view to defend it, so relativism is self-defeating. Consider each prong of attack.

First prong: relativist defense of relativism. Consider the relativist's dialectical context. An argument for relativism amounts to an argument against absolutism. So to engage with their opponents, relativists must argue on grounds absolutists take seriously. But absolutists will reject as question-begging the assertion that epistemic merit can be assessed subjectively, as well as the idea that this assertion can be defended using subjective

considerations, which have no bearing on epistemic merit as the absolutist understands it. Hence a subjectivist case for subjectivist relativism fails. Nor will absolutists accept the standards by which pluralism is defensible. Suppose, for example, that, to support their view, pluralists point out that it is not self-contradictory. Perhaps by *that* standard pluralism is justifiable, but absolutists will reject the idea that mere consistency is adequate support for a view. So a pluralist case for pluralism fails too. Indeed, the absolutist will not be satisfied with anything short of a non-relativist defense of relativism, so that is what is required. In sum:

1. To successfully defend their view relativists must honor the no-dead-lock principle that each side in a dispute must argue on the basis of claims acceptable to the opposing side.
2. They cannot meet this principle if they argue on relativist grounds.
3. So a relativist case for relativism is no case at all.

To reject this argument, it suffices for relativists to defeat its first premise, as follows: like anyone else who adopts the no-deadlock principle, absolutists must apply it to themselves. Since no one can defeat relativism or defend absolutism on grounds acceptable to determined relativists, absolutists must conclude that *neither* relativism nor absolutism is defensible. As for relativists, they do not face this difficulty, since they need not rely on the no-deadlock principle in a relativist case for relativism. Nor is the absolutist positioned to show that relativists *have* to honor the no-deadlock principle, for absolutists must, by that very principle, argue on grounds acceptable to relativists. Relativists, however, find that principle antithetical to their case, and reject anything that supports it. Thus accepting the no-deadlock principle bars absolutists from insisting that relativists follow suit!

Recall that the first prong of the antirelativist dilemma consisted of the charge that relativism cannot be supported relatively, since that would (a) beg the question and (b) violate the no-ties principle. We've dealt with (a); now let us consider (b).

Admittedly, in arguing for *anything* subjectivist relativists are greatly hobbled by their position that no standard is authoritative. If they are correct, there is no authoritative point of view from which to defend any view, including the assertion that no standard is authoritative. Still, claims can be 'supported' subjectively, in the same sense that assertions of taste and related matters are 'defensible.' Thus its proponents might say it would be a bummer if subjectivism were false. However, by their own admission, the subjectivist's 'defense' of a view A does not show that it is preferable to an alternative position B, for proponents of B can easily 'support' B and 'criticize' A subjectively. In particular, subjectivist-style grounds cannot be adduced to show that subjectivist relativism is better than absolutism, since

absolutists can easily 'support' *their* view subjectively, say on the grounds that people who deny absolutism are irritating.

Like subjectivists, pluralist relativists can offer a relativist defense of their view: if each standard (applied in exclusion of all others) is authoritative (or if many are), then whether a view is defensible depends on the standard in play, and pluralism is defensible relative to standards that support it. For instance, it is endorsed by a standard that approves of any view that is not self-contradictory. However, pluralists must admit that a pluralist-style 'defense' of a view A does not show that it is preferable to an alternative B, whose advocates might defend B and attack A relative to their own standards. So a pluralist defense of pluralism does not show it is superior to absolutism.

Absolutists will be ready to reject a relativist defense of subjectivism as well as a relativist case for pluralism upon concluding that both violate the no-ties principle: a 'defense' of relativism that does not contend—let alone establish—that relativism is superior to absolutism is not a defense at all. But will relativists have the same response? Not at all, since they reject the no-ties principle! They will admit that, on their view, by some 'valid' standards relativism is not justifiable. For people who embrace those standards, relativism *is* indefensible. But there are also 'valid' standards by which relativism can be supported. For anyone who accepts the no-ties principle, relativism is indefensible, but it does not follow that, 'for the relativist,' relativism cannot be supported.

Mightn't absolutists *insist* on the no-ties principle? Suppose they appeal to the no-deadlock principle, and say that relativists are not really engaging with absolutists unless they honor the no-ties principle. We have already seen that the no-deadlock principle bars absolutists from insisting that relativists adopt the no-deadlock principle. Obviously that same principle bars absolutists from arguing that relativists should adopt the no-ties principle, too. This is not to say that the no-ties principle is false, however; the point is that the no-deadlock principle bars absolutists from expecting relativists to argue on the basis of *any* principle antithetical to relativism.

Second prong: non-relativist defense. According to the second prong of the antirelativist dilemma, relativists cannot press their case on a non-relative basis, since doing so requires that they give up relativism. Can the relativist escape this prong, too?

It is true that a defense of relativism acceptable to its proponents will not automatically count as a case against absolutism compelling to *its* proponents. It does not follow, however, that relativists cannot set forth a case against absolutism that is compelling to absolutists, nor that they must abandon relativism in doing so. Relativists can attack absolutism using the absolutist's own style of argumentation. To do this without embracing absolutism in the process, relativists can pursue a strategy skeptics have always adopted: turn the tables and argue that their opponents hold assumptions that undermine their own view. Let's spell this out.

Like relativists, skeptics are often criticized on the grounds that they are in no position to defend their view if it is correct. But there is also a familiar response: skeptics have no need to justify or adopt their premises, since these are claims their opponents make; the skeptic is developing a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, pointing out dire implications of the antiskeptic's own position. Thus, it is the antiskeptic who needs to worry about whether the skeptic's premises are defensible.

Similarly, relativists may lay the pincer argument at the doorstep of the absolutist. It is a *reductio* based on views absolutists take seriously. Assuming that absolutists cannot wriggle out of the skeptic's claim that the defense tenet cannot be met, *they* must accept the reasoning of the preliminary dilemma, which commits them to the disjunctive parity thesis. *They* have to accept either standard skepticism or, after lowering the bar, standard credulism. This choice is not quite the same as the choice between subjectivist and pluralist relativism, which absolutists would be forced into only if they followed relativists in accepting verificationism (and not all will, so absolutists can escape the full force of the pincer argument), but it is certainly a horror for the absolutist. For if the disjunctive parity thesis is true, it is impossible to defend absolutism. Standard skepticism implies that no standard can be defended. Standard credulism, on the other hand, implies that many standards can be supported, and if that is true, we are in no position to show that only one standard is authoritative even if it is true. Either way, the absolutist is defenseless.

For relativists, the situation could scarcely be better. They can 'defend' their view in their own way. They cannot support it to the satisfaction of the absolutist, but this hardly matters since absolutists cannot defend their own view to their own satisfaction. Apparently it is absolutism that proves indefensible.

We now have the answer to the question we posed in this section: absolutism cannot be supported merely on the grounds that relativism is self-defeating. But there are other ways to defend absolutism, including a strategy that, until now, we have suppressed: denying the skeptic's prediction that the terms of the defense tenet cannot be met. It is time to consider this approach.

The Skeptic's Prediction

Recall the argument for standard skepticism:

1. It is rational to use a standard only if it can be given a defense that does not involve arbitrary assumptions, circularity, or dialectical deadlock (the defense tenet).

2. No standard's authoritativeness can be defended without arbitrary assumptions, circularity, or dialectical deadlock (the skeptic's prediction).
3. So no standard's authoritativeness can be adequately defended (standard skepticism).

When confronted with this argument, many epistemologists will want to accept the first premise and deny the second. Indeed, one of the most important and enduring strands of endeavor in epistemology has been the attempt to demonstrate, in a way that is consistent with the defense tenet, the authoritativeness of an epistemic standard. Many will want to take the same traditional approach when it comes to relativism. By successfully attacking the skeptic's prediction, absolutists would position themselves to show that there is an authoritative epistemic standard, and, simultaneously, would undermine the relativist's pincer argument, by knocking away its skeptical prong. The relativist could no longer force the absolutist to conclude that absolutism is indefensible. Nothing relativists could say, in self-defense, would have any merit to the absolutist.

However, there is a problem with the traditional approach: there are no good grounds for denying the skeptic's prediction. Certainly there is no consensus on any strategy for denying the prediction; in all likelihood, the hostility among epistemologists towards it is not based on the *case* against it. Instead, I suggest, the hostility is based on the belief that, of the two possible ways to counter the argument for standard skepticism, it is the only viable approach. To attack the skeptic's argument, we must deny the prediction or the defense tenet. But epistemologists have long suspected that the credulist leg of the argument for the preliminary dilemma is correct: unless the tenet is true, then defenses that are circular, arbitrary or in dialectical deadlock are acceptable, and virtually any epistemic standard is defensible. Epistemologists want to refute skepticism, but in doing so they don't want to embrace an uncritical credulist view. They fear that the price of abandoning the defense tenet is that, as Feyerabend (1975; cf. Moser 1993, p. 1) proclaimed, *anything goes*. They see only one way out: denying 2, the prediction, and not 1, the tenet.

I think it is time to give up on the traditional approach to criticizing skepticism. Attempts to deny 2 have proven to be a fruitless dead end. It is time to respond to standard skepticism (and its offshoots) by rejecting 1 instead. Indeed, we should reject 1 *because* 2 is true: the tenet blocks the way to our defending an epistemic standard, so it must be mistaken.

Admittedly, my claim that no one has found a way to refute the skeptic's prediction is not a case for endorsing that prediction. But I won't try to prove that the prediction is true. I will assume it is. What I want to do is remove the barrier, just described, against accepting the skeptic's prediction. I want to show that even if the prediction is true, the skeptic cannot

stop us from supporting absolutism, and our case need not devolve into uncritical credulism or relativism. Even theorists who are convinced that the skeptic's prediction can be shown false might find this project interesting. It is no small matter that we can give skeptics their prediction and still argue convincingly for absolutism.

How to Defend Absolutism

My contention is (a) there is an argument that, even though it violates the defense tenet, provides adequate support for the authoritativeness of an epistemic standard, yet (b) not just any epistemic standard can be supported in the same way, so we need not fall into some form of credulism or relativism. To defend (a), I must define 'standard', clarify the conditions under which a standard is 'correct' or 'authoritative', and, finally, sketch how, on a suitably weakened defense tenet, the authoritativeness of such a beast can be adequately defended. To support (b), I must argue that the weakened tenet does not make it possible to underwrite the authoritativeness of wholly counterintuitive standards.

First task: clarify 'standard'. Epistemic standards come in different kinds. There are *warrant standards*, which are rules or criteria by which we assess how probable it is that a claim is true. There are also *management standards*, which are rules (or policies, methods, procedures and so forth) of two sorts: rules that tell us whether to (begin, continue, or cease to) believe claims, and whose purpose is to enable us to develop and maintain a worldview that is as complete and accurate as possible, and rules that tell us whether to maintain (or revise) these rules, again with verisimilitude as the final purpose. For convenience, we can treat warrant standards as a kind of management standard, and call the one type of rule a *belief management rule* and the other a *rule management rule*. The latter are, in effect, standards for managing standards.

Second task: clarify the conditions under which a standard is authoritative. An epistemic standard is authoritative or 'correct' insofar as it is truth-*conducive*; that is, to the extent that its application in a wide range of the circumstances in which people sometimes are placed facilitates our reaching (and retaining) the truth. The greater the truth-conduciveness of a management rule (including a rule for authoritativeness) in a broad range of people's circumstances, the more authoritative it is.

But if authoritativeness is a matter of degree, as just said, then it is not immediately clear what absolutists mean when they claim that *one* standard is authoritative. Presumably their main claim is something like the following: a unique core standard is not only truth-conducive, it is the *most* truth-conducive, hence most authoritative, core standard we might adopt. But this claim requires qualification, since, however helpful a standard T is, there

might be any number of variations on T, each as truth-conducive as the next. I take the absolutist's claim to mean that one standard T is not only truth-conducive enough to give us a good chance of arriving at an accurate view of the world, it is the *core part* of all of the highly truth-conducive standards we might adopt, so that any highly truth-conducive standard will be a development of T. Thus absolutism is compatible with the view, which we might call *pluralist absolutism*, that by augmenting one core epistemic standard in competing ways we can create a range of equally authoritative standards.

Third task: show how to defend a standard. To defend the authoritativeness of some standard T, our main job is to establish that applying T will help us reach the truth. A complete defense of absolutism as I have understood it will also require showing that T is the heart of any of the most truth-conducive standards we might employ. Let us sketch how we can achieve the first objective, leaving the second for another occasion.

Defending our standard's truth-conduciveness will require that we take for granted our worldview, our depiction of the truth about the world. We'll have to argue that, in a world that takes the shape we assume it to take, people who adhere to our standard have a good chance of arriving at an accurate view of the world. Now, I will not attempt to sketch out a complete epistemic standard in all its detail, or its defense. My claim is just that many of the belief management practices by which people (implicitly) steer themselves fit together as components of one overall standard whose authoritativeness is adequately defensible given the worldview we take for granted. These practices, which, taken together, we can call the ordinary standard, include four belief management rules and two rule management rules:

(1) Do not reason in ways that violate rules of deductive logic.
(2) Other things being equal, retain beliefs prompted by your senses.
(3) Other things being equal, believe the best explanation of your data (cf. Harman 1986).
(4) Continue to believe what you do unless you have good reason to stop (Peirce 1877, Popper 1959, Harman 1984, 1986).
(5) Other things being equal, prefer (as more authoritative) one management rule over a competitor when you have good reason to believe it is more truth-conducive.
(6) Continue to operate by these six management rules unless you have good reason to stop.

In the commonsense world of tables, pumpkins and people, adhering to these principles gives us a good chance of reaching the truth. No doubt, they need a good deal of clarification, and they can be improved with refinement. Our expectations for an epistemic standard should not be overly great: there are no algorithms for cranking out the truth about the world (Feyerabend

1975). It is especially unrealistic to think that wholly general principles such as (1)–(6) will suffice in every domain of inquiry. They will have to be supplemented with specialized principles in specific areas of investigation. Our expectations in some domains should be even lower than our expectations in others. Deductive logic does not tell us what to think about the empirical world; still, rules of deductive argument must always preserve truth and they must do so in every possible world. Rules of non-deductive, or inductive or 'ampliative' argument cannot be expected always to preserve truth even in the actual world.

Consider two of the points just made, one of which is (relatively) uncontroversial, while the other is not. The uncontroversial point is the conditional claim that *if* the world is shaped the way commonsense beliefs say it is, the ordinary epistemic standard is truth-conducive. The controversial point is that this conditional claim constitutes a *defense* of the ordinary epistemic standard. The problem is obvious: the kind of argument I just sketched violates the defense tenet! It involves circularity or arbitrariness.

In effect, this objection says that the skeptic's defense tenet must be a part of any epistemic standard that is to count as authoritative—that a truly authoritative standard must include, and cohere with, the following rules (which are counterparts of our rules 4 and 6):

(S4) Adopt or retain a belief only if you can provide an adequate justification for it, a justification that does not involve circularity, arbitrariness or dialectical deadlock.

(S6) Adopt or retain a management rule only if you can provide an adequate justification for it, a justification free of circularity, arbitrariness or dialectical deadlock.

However, the objection is mistaken, and the skeptic's characterization of rationality is false. Adhering to (S4) precludes our having any beliefs at all about the world, and operating with (S6) deprives us of any standard at all—including itself. These rules leave us rudderless (having no policies for managing our beliefs) and blind (having no view of the world, and no chance for arriving at the truth about the world). Only if we retain (4) and (6), or versions thereof, do we have any chance whatever of arriving at an accurate view of the world, while at the same time avoiding the credulist position that nearly any standards and nearly any worldview is warranted. So it is rational to retain (4) and (6) and irrational to replace them with (S4) and (S6). The history of philosophy is replete with attempts to replace the components of the ordinary epistemic standard with rules that appear to be better guides to the truth but that end up restricting us to an overly narrow conception of reality. The skeptic's defense tenet is the most radical example. A less extreme example is the empiricist's version of (3) (rarely adopted in this uncompromising form): believe only what is empirically verifiable.

Another is the positivist's rule: believe only what is analytic or empirically verifiable.

Only against the backdrop of a worldview can we assess how truth-conducive a standard is, and only with an epistemic standard can we assess the truth of a worldview. So we must either argue, circularly, from our worldview to our standard and back again, or, arbitrarily, take one or the other for granted. Such an argument is part of (what we must count as) an adequate defense even though it involves circularity or arbitrariness (or both: circularity *is* a form of arbitrariness). And this sort of argument is endorsed by (4) and (6). Let us add that the argument is adequate even though it involves inescapable dialectical deadlock: it is not always true that, if an argument between two disputants cannot be resolved on common grounds, then neither side's view is defensible; if it were, we could not resist solipsism. Nor could we resist the extreme form of skepticism that insists on the defense tenet. Skeptics could veto any case we offer.

I have argued that the ordinary epistemic standard is defensible. However, it is important to see that, from the standpoint of rationality, there is no *need* to provide such a defense. That is, being able to justify the ordinary standard (1)–(6) is not a precondition for its rational use. Nor is being able to defend our worldview a condition for its rational acceptance. In line with (4) and (6), it is rational to retain our worldview as well as the ordinary epistemic standard unless we come to have good grounds to stop.[11] This consequence aligns our view with pragmatism (Peirce 1877) and reliabilism (Ramsey 1931, Armstrong 1973, Goldman 1979).

Final task: avoiding credulism and pluralist relativism. We can now consider whether our strategy for defending the ordinary epistemic standard commits us to credulism or relativism.

One reason for optimism is that many conceivable standards are patently indefensible. When we assess the authoritativeness of a standard we are assessing its truth-conduciveness; obviously, many conceivable standards do not facilitate our reaching the truth. Hence we can rule out the authoritativeness of many kinds of standards from the outset. For example, a policy of believing only false claims obviously is indefensible. The same goes for the policy of believing anything tasteful, or whatever makes us happy. A standard that is too impractical or too vague to apply is also indefensible.

Unfortunately, these fairly obvious points only get us so far, and there remain several challenges to overcome.

First challenge. On our account, the claim that the ordinary epistemic standard is authoritative is only contingently true. Hence, each of a great many standards might have been authoritative, since there is a possible world in which it is (more) truth-conducive (than any competitor). Even wishful thinking may be part of an authoritative standard in a world where wishes come true. Doesn't it follow that many standards are authoritative, as pluralist relativism says?

No. The claim that many standards *might have been* authoritative (i.e., for each of many standards, there is a possible world in which it is authoritative), which is correct, is much weaker than, and fails to entail, the false claim that many standards *are* authoritative (i.e., many standards are each authoritative in the actual world). (For similar reasons, a case for subjectivist relativism cannot be based on the grounds that there are worlds in which the ordinary epistemic standard is not truth-conducive.)

Admittedly, it seems intuitively false that authoritativeness is a contingent matter. Platonic-Cartesian rationalism, which shaped the intuitions of most (Western) epistemologists, suggests that deductive and mathematical logic, whose rules can be worked out a priori since valid in any possible world, is the paradigm for rational thought. The rationalist legacy suggests that, a priori, we can identify each authoritative belief management practice (each component of a complete authoritative standard), something we could do only if authoritativeness were wholly a matter of necessity—that is, only if each of the practices comprising our standard were authoritative in every possible world if authoritative at all. If authoritativeness were a matter of necessity, there would be hope that, using unaided reason, we could satisfy ourselves that each belief-management practice is authoritative, in much the same way that we can satisfy ourselves that $2 + 2 = 4$. Since the authoritativeness of some of the practices that go to make up a complete standard is a contingent matter, we have to rely on experience. There it is: the intuitions are misleading. Intuitions sometimes can serve as prima facie evidence for or against theories (Bealer and Strawson 1992), but intuitions are not sacrosanct, and when we identify intuitions that have been molded under false assumptions we must revise them. There is no such thing as a complete standard that is truth-conducive in every possible world; hence it is clearly false that a complete standard is authoritative in every possible world. The correct standard might not have been correct.

Second challenge. On our view of authoritativeness, we can imagine a situation in which people believe things that are epistemically inappropriate even though there is no way they can be expected to discover this shortcoming, and are, in this sense, blameless. Suppose that Fred accepts epistemic standard D, that D says unequivocally that D is truth-conducive given Fred's worldview, and that D would indeed be truth-conducive if Fred's worldview were true. Unfortunately, in Fred's world D is wholly misleading. (Maybe Fred is plagued by a demon who undermines the truth-conduciveness of D and Fred cannot detect the demonic manipulation.) Worse luck, an alternative standard T really is truth-conducive yet nothing in Fred's beliefs about the world suggests that this is so. Then T, not D, determines what is epistemically appropriate for Fred to believe, yet Fred's worldview suggests that D determines what is appropriate. Isn't this result counterintuitive? If so, we must adopt a different notion of authoritativeness. Let us say that *actual* authoritativeness is truth-conduciveness in the

world as it is, and *apparent* authoritativeness is truth-conduciveness given the worldview we accept. The view we need is that *real* authoritativeness is apparent authoritativeness—then Fred's standard D determines what is appropriate for him to believe in spite of its being a bad guide to the truth. And then we can conclude, with pluralist relativists, that standards are authoritative only relative to worldviews.

Admittedly, it seems counter to our intuitions that everything we believe can point to the authoritativeness of one standard, yet another determines what counts as a rational belief. I suggest that two errors are responsible for these misleading intuitions.

First error: once again our rationalist legacy, discussed earlier, is partly to blame. Our intuitions and expectations are shaped under the influence of the view that a standard is authoritative in every possible world if authoritative at all, which fosters the view that we can identify authoritativeness a priori. This view, in turn, suggests that if a standard really is authoritative, we will always have good reason to think it is, no matter what our circumstances are like. It cannot happen that everything we believe suggests that some standard is authoritative when it is not. However, as we have said, these intuitions must be revised now that we reject the rationalist legacy.

Second error: It seems that (a) everything we believe will be epistemically appropriate so long as we follow the dictates of the epistemic standard by which we manage our beliefs. And (a) suggests (b) if our standard is self-supporting given our worldview—if our standard says of itself, on the strength of our view of the world, that it is authoritative—then there can be no epistemic objection whatever to our concluding that our standard is authoritative. Yet (b) is incompatible with the assumption that a standard is not an authoritative guide to rational belief if not truth-conducive. Indeed, (b) implies that authoritativeness is nothing more than self-support relative to our worldview (this is much like Richard Foley's (2003) view of rationality as immunity to self-criticism). So (a) suggests that our view of authoritativeness is mistaken, and that there is no way that everything we believe can suggest that some standard is authoritative when it is not. We are led to reduce real authoritativeness to apparent authoritativeness, and our intuitions are influenced accordingly.

There *is* a sense in which (a) is true. However, it is misleading, and (a) does not support (b). The rationality of a belief involves two things: a person S has met the *external* requirement for rational belief that *p* if and only if the standard guiding S in believing *p* is authoritative. S has met the *internal* requirement for rational belief that *p* if and only if S believes *p* in accordance with the dictates of S's standard. Rational belief is created through the joint efforts of the world, on the one hand, and epistemic agents, on the other.[12] The world's contribution is the external component: only if the world takes a certain shape will our standard be truth-conducive. Our contribution is the internal component: it is up to us to apply our

standard in accordance with its dictates. We exhaust our part in the bargain when we satisfy the internal component—in this sense (a) is true. But the world has to do its part—in this sense (a) is misleading. Thus even if we have done our part in concluding that our standard is authoritative, there still can be an epistemic objection to our reasoning, contrary to (b). For (through no fault of ours) the standard guiding our reasoning might not be truth-conducive.[13]

Advocates of *internalism*, the view that epistemic merit depends wholly on factors accessible from within the perspective of the agent (BonJour 1997, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman 2001) will resist our responses to the first and second challenges. It is worth emphasizing, however, that internalists rely heavily on appeals to the very intuitions that, we have argued, are forged under the influence of errors. According to some, internalism just is the rationalist doctrine that a standard is authoritative in every possible world if authoritative at all (Luper 1988, Coney and Feldman 2001). This position is unworkable, and internalists cannot defend it by arguing solely on the basis of the intuitions it inculcates.

Third challenge. My defense of the ordinary epistemic standard took the commonsense view of the world for granted. But if taking this worldview for granted is epistemically permissible, may we not take any view of the world for granted? If so, can't we defend the authoritativeness of nearly any standard? As we have already said, for nearly any standard there is a possible world in which it is truth-conducive. So to support the authoritativeness of a standard, all we have to do is take for granted a worldview in which it is properly truth-conducive.

This objection is based on the permissive assumption that it is rational to *adopt* a belief for which we have no grounds. If this assumption were correct, it would be rational to adopt, arbitrarily, an entire worldview, and with the right worldview, nearly any epistemic standard will be defensible. This reasoning supports standard credulism, if not pluralist relativism. Fortunately, nothing in our defense of the ordinary epistemic standard commits us to the permissive assumption. For the very reason that this assumption leads to credulism we should reject it. What we are committed to is the Peircean principle that it is rational to *retain* a belief unless we have positive reason to think it false—even if we also lack reason to think it true. On this principle, it is not rational arbitrarily to *adopt* a worldview and any standard it favors. Given the Peircean principle, it is true that if we *had* a different worldview we *could have* defended some other standard. But here there is no support for standard credulism or relativism. The fact that we *might have been able to* defend some standard does not imply that we *can* defend that standard. We can only defend a standard from the point of view of one worldview, namely our own, and the only standard we can defend is the one that is most truth-conducive from the vantage point of that worldview. Let us add that even if we did have a different worldview, we still

could not defend just any standard, but only one that, arguably, is truth-conducive from the vantage point of that different worldview. For *no* one, in *any* possible world, is it the case that nearly any standard is justifiable.

Fourth challenge. Among people in the actual world, there is a wide range of worldviews, so there is a wide range of defensible standards. For no one is it the case that nearly any standard is justifiable, but for each of a great many standards there will be someone relative to whom that standard will be defensible. In this sense a great many standards are defensible—each by different groups of people. Granting verificationism, pluralist relativists are back in business: relative to each of many separate groups, a different epistemic standard is authoritative.

This challenge is based on the assumption that there are groups of people committed to worldviews that are so widely divergent from each other as to support entirely different epistemic standards. But this assumption is not plausible. Take any worldview that is actually accepted, at least by sane people. In the world as it would be if that worldview were correct, the ordinary epistemic standard is truth-conducive. I cannot fully defend this claim; I will try to make it plausible with an example. Consider that there are people who believe that incantations will produce certain effects magically. I claim that, in a world in which magic occurred, the ordinary epistemic standard would help people reach true beliefs. For experience would bear out the efficacy of the spells, and lead people to a host of accurate relevant beliefs. We can conclude that the authoritativeness of the ordinary standard is defensible for every actual person in spite of the differences in their specific beliefs. Hence for everyone it is reasonable to think that the ordinary standard is the correct one, and that absolutism is true.

None of this is to deny that there is a good deal of divergence among people's beliefs about the world. Some people have sophisticated views about theoretical physics, while others have very confused ideas in this area. Some people are well positioned to observe the behavior of distant nebulae or furtive woodland creatures, and can speak knowledgeably about these matters, while others do not know a star from a planet or a wood-chuck from a chipmunk. Given these differences, some variations of the ordinary epistemic standard are defensible, each by different groups of people. Moreover, the rationality of belief is relative in the following sense: beliefs are not rational *simpliciter*; the rational status of a belief varies relative to people's evidence and circumstances. The astronomer's belief about some twinkling heavenly body is warranted where the layperson's is not; indeed, my belief as to whether I am sitting on April 30, 2003 at 5 pm is warranted, while your belief about my position, if you have one, is not. These familiar points do not imply that epistemic relativism is true. They are straightforward consequences of the fact that the one authoritative standard yields different assessments of epistemic merit (assessments as to a belief's status as rational, or justified, and so forth) depending on a person's

evidence and circumstances. Epistemic absolutists will certainly grant that rationality is relative to these factors—this is an innocuous, derivative form of relativity. What they insist upon is that, for all actual people, one core standard is the appropriate one for making assessments of epistemic merit.

Fifth challenge. I have said that an epistemic standard is authoritative insofar as it is truth-conducive. This amounts to the assertion that the *standard* (or metastandard) for the authoritativeness of an epistemic standard is truth-conduciveness. But other metastandards are possible, and people manage their beliefs in accordance with a variety of criteria; it is rational for us to consider our own metastandard authoritative only if we can show it to be rationally preferable to the alternatives (Stephen Stich 1988 argues roughly this way). However, either no (meta)standard is defensible, or a great many are, as the reasoning involved in the preliminary dilemma shows. Hence, we cannot single out some metastandard as rationally preferable, and in that case there is no way to defend the rational preferability of an epistemic standard.

My view is that epistemic standards at *any* level are authoritative insofar as they are truth conducive. The fifth challenge is that either this view cannot be supported (the skeptical charge), or, if it can, then similar defenses favor taking a wide range of criteria as the mark of the authoritativeness of epistemic standards at whatever level (the credulist charge). However, those of us who identify authoritativeness with truth conduciveness can meet the challenge.[14] The justification for continuing to take truth-conduciveness as the mark of authoritativeness is that doing so is truth-conducive. Indeed, unless our epistemic standard takes truth-conduciveness to determine authoritativeness, it will not be truth-conducive. Such a defense is circular. As already noted, however, it is rational to tolerate circularity at certain fundamental junctures. But if we accept this defense, aren't we committed to saying that it is rational to adopt any criterion as the mark of authoritativeness, so long as it is self-supporting in the way that truth-conduciveness is?[15] No, what we are committed to is rule (6) of the ordinary standard—the (Peircean) principle that it is rational to retain our standard for authoritativeness unless we have positive reason to alter it—and rule (5), which says, of the discovery that we can improve the reliability of our standard, that this is reason to alter it. These principles do not condone the decision, based on nothing, to replace our criterion of authoritativeness with a fresh one, even one that is self-supporting.

Notes

1. This essay elaborates upon Luper 1990 and 2001, refining some arguments and correcting defects in others.

2. The literature concerning relativism is vast. An excellent (critical) overview is Siegel 1987. Many relativists defend both ontological and epistemic relativism, using the former to help with the latter. But some (Field 1982, Stich 1988) reject the former and defend the latter. I mean to criticize the epistemic relativist who does not assume the truth of ontological relativism.

3. Later I will suggest that proponents of relativism draw upon a restricted form of skepticism, namely *standard skepticism*: the position that no epistemic standard is defensible. The route from standard skepticism to relativism is perforce indirect, however, since the two views are not fully compatible. Standard skepticism is implied by subjectivist relativism, but the former does not imply the latter.

4. Kuhn (1987), p. 94.

5. "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge," p. 22. In Hollis (1982) 21–48.

6. 1987, p. 6. Siegel seems to define epistemic relativism in terms of the claim about parity, but he may mean to say, as I do, that the claim is part of the argument for relativism.

7. Alternatively: If no standard can be adequately defended, then no standard is authoritative; if virtually any standard can be defended as well as a standard that is admittedly authoritative, then any of these standards is authoritative.

8. See the excerpts in Annas and Barnes (1985).

9. Relativists, we have said, apply verificationism to standards, saying the mark of the correctness of a standard is its defensibility. Suppose they apply verificationism to truth itself, saying that (ideally) defensible claims are true (Putnam 1978). Then, by altering the pincer argument in obvious ways, they can derive ontological relativism. (And why apply verificationism to standards and *not* to truth? It is hard to take our route to epistemic relativism without then accepting ontological relativism.) But the kind of response we offer, below, against the original pincer argument is effective against this defense of ontological relativism, too.

10. Strikingly, pluralism has the advantages adduced in favor of (speaker-centered) contextualism by its recent proponents (e.g., Lewis 1996, Cohen 1987), namely, the possibility of claiming that skepticism is avoidable if, but only if, weak enough standards are in play. The claim can also be defended by an absolutist who accepts the skeptical principle, rejected below, that an adequate defense of a claim cannot involve dialectical deadlock, but then it is self-defeating. This spurious skeptical principle is a salient source of the facial plausibility contextualist accounts of knowledge and rationality enjoy. Deadlock is wholly a matter of context: whether deadlock exists depends on what disputants take for granted. Thus it can happen that *I* am warranted in believing *p* until *you* come along and reject my mode of defending *p*, say by pointing out that I might be a brain in a vat, a possibility I do not know how to rule out. Then, whether I take the possibility seriously or not, I am no longer justified in believing *p*, unless you go away, and I ignore your doubts.

11. The previous points constitute my response to the view Peter Klein (1999) calls "infinitism".

12. I make similar points about the division of epistemic labor in Luper 1985, 1988.

13. Something else contributes to the impression that real authoritativeness is apparent authoritativeness: as we have said, we may arrive at rational beliefs about the world even if we never check our standard for authoritativeness or truth-conduciveness. (We have to check for self-support only if we are asking specifically whether it is rational to believe that our standard is self-supporting.) This can foster the illusion that the authoritativeness of our standard is not a requirement for rationality. In fact, however, authoritativeness is part of the external component of rational belief.

14. Our claim that the authoritativeness of our standard can be defended is consistent with the fact that people could be *prudentially* rational even if they do not manage their beliefs in an epistemically appropriate way. Prudential behavior is dependent upon our final goals. Someone whose highest and sole priority is (say) to live by the tenets of a cult may well find epistemic rationality inconvenient.

15. Cf. Peter Achinstein's 1962 response to Max Black 1958 in the debate over induction.

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