LET'S BE CONSISTENT:

INCORPORATING AN ARGUMENT FROM THE RADICAL SCEPTIC

INTO OUR EPISTEMOLOGY

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PREFACE

I am writing this paper as an undergraduate senior attending California State University, Fresno. One of my advisors there, is Dr. James W. Slinger. The problem that I was interested in when beginning this paper, was the problem of finding a response to radical and global scepticism. The amount of time I had to invest in developing or locating a response was limited to three semester units. I read widely in case I could locate a different perspective to view this problem from, a perspective within which the problem would not arise or could be dealt with. Though there were some such perspectives (i.e. arguments from semantics), I did not find them *immediately* satisfactory. I decided to apply myself in creating my own response. Some of the readings did influence me, and I would like to have been able to tie my reasoning in with others', but accurately understanding the reasoning of others and properly tying them in was too time consuming of a task for my time limit.

In the paper, I accept some conclusions of the sceptic, yet I resist becoming a sceptic. I argue that abandoning my trust in beliefs based on the radical sceptic's arguments, would be inconsistent. I provide a framework within which this argument works. The reasoning contained in this paper is loose and lacking in organization; so, it is only among the early steps in forming a strong epistemology. However, I believe there is sufficient potential in the reasoning to prompt consideration and further study.

INTRODUCTION

Most of us rely unquestionably on our cognitive faculties. A person's cognitive faculties are generally believed to be perception, introspection, reason, and memory. These cognitive faculties can be understood as different components of a person's belief forming mechanism. Each of us trusts in our mechanism to form reliable beliefs, but what is the source of this trust?

Radical scepticism tells us that the reliability of one's mechanism, cannot be determined by that mechanism. There is no argument to the conclusion that one's mechanism is reliable that does not presuppose that one's mechanism is reliable. As such, one cannot determine whether one's mechanism is reliable. If one cannot determine that one's own mechanism is reliable, then the source of our trust in it cannot be that.

Sections I and II contains a discussion of some sceptical issues. In section I, I exposit a sceptical argument to the conclusion that one cannot determine that one's own mechanism is reliable. In section II, I argue what implications the sceptical argument has on our beliefs. First, the non-sceptic is *not* inconsistent in maintaining that his mechanism is reliable. Second, the non-sceptic cannot consistently abandon a belief in the reliability of his mechanism on grounds of the sceptic's argument. Third, that the non-sceptic must maintain that he cannot determine the reliability of his mechanism and

more specifically that no argument can be given that cannot be undercut by the sceptical argument.

Sections III-V contain support for my preconceptions or moves that I relied upon in sections I-II. Section III contains arguments for a reliabilist version of belief formation. I argue that our belief forming mechanism creates reliable beliefs and not true beliefs. Reliability is a weaker condition than truth. Even in light of the history of our own mistakes and that of humanity, we can maintain that our mechanism is reliable. Section IV contains arguments for a principle of consistency, a principle that I employ throughout this paper. It is one of my chief reasoning tools. I articulate a notion of consistency within reliabilism, and why inconsistent belief systems are unreliable. Section V contains a discussion of and support for intrumentalist and internalist conceptions of belief content. Beliefs content need only be instrumental in the achievement of an entity's goals. Instrumentalism entails weaker claims. Requiring that the content is referential or representational, is unnecessary. The contents of beliefs exist in the internal relations between beliefs among the belief forming mechanism. Positing something external as part of the content, is unnecessary. Internalism entails weaker claims. Further, our past beliefs about entities that are now believed to be non-existent support an Internalist conception.

I: THE RADICAL SCEPTIC

A radical sceptic *expresses* no confidence in his belief forming mechanism. He has no *expressed* belief that his mechanism is reliable.[1] Yet, a sceptic can offer some powerful arguments; these can influence the non-sceptic's belief system. Sceptics are not inconsistent in offering their arguments because they do not have to accompany them with any belief in their reliability. However, since the arguments are in a form that non-sceptics believe are reliable, non-sceptics must consider and respond to them if they are to believe they have engaged in Epistemology fully. The sceptical argument that I will be considering in this section concludes that a non-sceptic cannot determine by (inductive or deductive) reason that his mechanism is reliable.

There is a degree of adaptability that can be achieved only through self-awareness of one's own belief mechanism. Circumstances can be imagined where having an understanding about the reliability of one's own mechanism can be useful. However, when one undergoes this self-examination and asks himself whether his fundamental mechanism is reliable, he finds that the question cannot be answered by him because the sceptical argument undercuts him. The sceptical argument is represented in figure 1.

[1] I add emphasis to 'express' because I believe that any goal directed behavior entails belief, and I do believe that many sceptics engage in that.

P_1 is easy to argue for. Determinations that assume what one is trying to prove are not reliable; they can be mistaken with any probability. However, what occurs in science is arguably an exception to P_1, for science forms predictions based on hypotheses, and if the predictions are successful, then this is taken as support for the hypotheses. Although this is legitimate in the context of science, it is not ligitimate in this context; for unlike science our very ability of being able to determine whether a prediction is successful is in question. P_2 is also easily argued for. A determination cannot be made except by way of a (supported or unsupported) belief in the reliability of one's mechanism. Since the question at hand is whether one's mechanism is reliable, one will have to assume it in order to determine it. Hence, one cannot determine whether one's belief mechanism is reliable.[2]

P_1	A determination cannot be made if it assumes what it is trying to determine.
P_2	A determination of the reliability of a mechanism assumes that the mechanism is reliable.
C	No determination about the reliability of a mechanism can be made.

Figure 1: Non-Sceptic's Fundamental Knowledge Structure

Let's describe four situations in order to grasp the situation. One can have either a reliable or an unreliable mechanism. Also, one can be determining (possibly unreliably) that one's mechanism is reliable or unreliable. It is clear that one with a reliable mechanism (assuming he ignored the sceptic's argument), could determine that his mechanism was reliable and that he couldn't determine that his mechanism was

[2] Note that P_1 cannot be argued for by reductio ad absurdum type arguments as well.

unreliable; for then his mechanism would be unreliable. It is also clear that one with a reliable mechanism could be either unreliably determining that one's mechanism was reliable or perhaps reliably determining that one's mechanism was unreliable. So, even if one believed that he had determined the reliability of his mechanism, he could still have an unreliable mechanism. Being able to form a belief about the reliability of one's mechanism does not support the conclusion that one's mechanism is reliable. This is represented in relevant respects by figure 2.

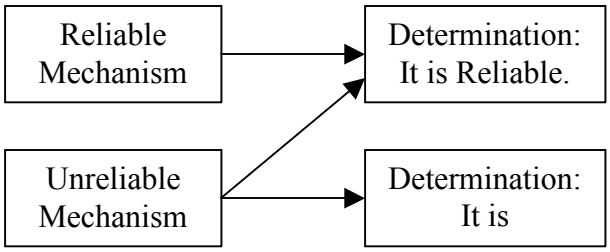

Figure 2: Belief is No Assurance

From figure 2, we see that the non-sceptic can have an unreliable mechanism and while believing that it was reliable. In this case, he would not have determined the reliability of his mechanism. And if a non-sceptic's mechanism was reliable, then he cannot determine the reliability, because through this argument, he can see that irregardless, he may be perfectly mistaken about having been able to determine the reliability of his mechanism; for, if his mechanism was unreliable, he would not be able to determine it. This argument does not stop at certitude in determination but includes determinations with probability. Determining with probability that one's mechanism was reliable

requires assuming that one's mechanism was probably reliable. Again, one will have to assume precisely what one is trying to determine.

This argument shows us that according to one's own belief forming mechanism, there may exist circumstances whereby we may be mistaken about anything. Further, if those circumstances exist, then we may be mistaken about the probability of those circumstances. It appears that all that one can say is that he may or may not have a reliable mechanism. But if one's behavior is greatly dependent on his beliefs, then how can he confidently act? A self-aware being studies circumstances, sees their position within them, and decides to act based on predictions of how behavior influences future circumstances. This behavior is dependent on the beliefs. If one is to confidently act, then he must confidently believe. But since one's confidence cannot be supported by reason, his confidence is like that from faith. The reliability of the mechanism that formed those beliefs cannot be determined; yet the beliefs are confidently employed.

III: THE NON-SCEPTIC

Any new belief in a belief system may require that changes be made within it. The belief system must remain consistent, and a new belief can produce inconsistencies. Some determination about how to modify the system in light of an inconsistency must be made. The conclusion of the sceptic's argument forms a new belief, and the following discussion determines how the sceptic's argument influences the non-sceptic's belief system. First, a non-sceptic may continue to maintain that his mechanism is reliable,

without producing inconsistency. Second, a non-sceptic cannot abandon the belief in the reliability of his mechanism on grounds of the sceptic's argument. Third, a non-sceptic must cease to offer inductive or deductive argument to the conclusion that his mechanism is reliable.

The sceptical argument was able to show that the non-sceptic could not determine that his mechanism was reliable. Can the non-sceptic continue to maintain that his mechanism is reliable? Yes, the non-sceptic can. That one can determine the reliability of his mechanism, is not implicit to holding any belief. Beliefs are organizations in the brain that influence behavior; the pre-condition for having a belief is its ability to influence behavior, not its ability to be determined. Hence, the non-sceptic can hold any belief without having determined it, including one about the reliability of his mechanism.

A non-sceptic cannot abandon his belief in the reliability of his mechanism on the grounds of the sceptic's argument. The abandonment would entail a belief in the reliability of the mechanism *forming* the sceptic's conclusion. One cannot abandon the belief, on the grounds of the belief; for this would mean holding the belief at the same moment. For if the belief was abandoned, then its abandonment could not be *supported* by the sceptical conclusion. If the belief were maintained, then its abandonment would produce inconsistency. That is, the sceptic's arguments are only forceful with the presupposition that a mechanism is reliable. Hence, if the sceptic's argument is influential, then the mechanism is reliable, and cannot be abandoned on the grounds of

the sceptic's argument. Thus, a non-sceptic cannot abandon his belief in the reliability of his mechanism.

So far I have argued that, the non-sceptic has no trouble with the argument as long as he is ready to accept the possibility of his mechanism being perfectly fallacious (and nothing more can be said here about the probability of the fallaciousness). The non-sceptic must maintain that his most fundamental belief forming mechanisms *are* reliable. Furthermore, it is not even possible to *use* a belief forming mechanism in goal directed behavior without implicitly having the belief that mechanism is reliable. The contents of beliefs exist in the organization of the brain; if a mechanism is used to some end, it is by necessity believed to have been reliable. Without this, beliefs would have no clear semantics. As a non-sceptic, the mechanism will be used for the goal of assessing the reliability of the sceptic's arguments; hence, in order to be consistent, the non-sceptic must maintain the mechanism is reliable. The non-sceptic is not inconsistent in maintaining this, he merely is not inductively or deductively justified in it. There need be no thesis in the non-sceptic's belief system of the necessity of inductive or deductive justification for the belief in the reliability of fundamental belief mechanisms. Such a thesis would make it impossible to have beliefs influence behavior and at the same time be consistent.

The articulated knowledge foundation of the non-sceptic is represented in relevant respects by figure 3. P_1 is not problematic, because since P_2 is a premise P_1 is within the realm of determination. P_2 cannot be argued for, except by using and acknowledging P_2

itself as a premise. Explaining how it is that P_2 will likely be desired since it is a condition we have imposed on our beliefs about the world, and any account of the world will have to be consistent with it. However, no justification for P_2 can come of it. At bottom will be our pure assumption in P_2. Our "pure assumption" I think is quite similar to faith, and this is likely to be difficult to accept given our natural inclination to think that all "local" inquiries are determinable by our mechanism. But not this inquiry is local and is not determinable, our mechanism has determined this. For the non-sceptic, not accepting the sceptic's conclusion results in inconsistency, abandoning his belief in the reliability of his mechanism produces inconsistency, yet accepting it and incorporating it into his belief system maintains consistency. This is what the non-sceptic must do.

P_1	If my belief forming mechanism is reliable, then beliefs B_1, …, B_n are reliable.
P_2.	My belief forming mechanism is reliable.
C.	Beliefs B_1, …, B_n are reliable.

Figure 3: Non-Sceptic's Fundamental Knowledge Structure

IV: RELIABILISM

The condition of forming true beliefs is a stronger one than the condition of forming reliable beliefs, for a mechanism. True beliefs are not the only useful ones. We are interested in truth because it, is believed to be useful. If the utility of our belief systems in helping us achieve our goals, is the motivation for our study of our belief systems; then the utility of them need only questioned. Our beliefs would then only need to be reliable

guides for achieving our goals. A reliable guide differs from a true guide in that a reliable guide need only take us to our destination eventually, taking multiple reliable steps rather than one true step. But our motivation for studying our belief system is simply to better achieve our goals, so the stronger condition of truth is at least unnecessary, and the weaker condition of reliability is satisfactory.

Further, maintaining a belief that our mechanism was truthful could not be done. First, we would have to reject our beliefs about the past, about our mistakes. Believing that we were mistaken so many times and so grotesquely (both individually and collectively) human species) and believing that our mechanism was truthful would be inconsistent. Instead, believing that each step brought us closer to achieving our goals, that each step out to be trusted as either bringing us to our destination or as taking us one step closer so that we will reach our destination is the most that can be contended. Further, we need not maintain that *each* step takes us closer to an ideal system; all that matters is that we reach our destination. Our past is consistent with this belief, because we do have beliefs that the application of our mechanism has progressively formed a more reliable belief system over the centuries.

IV: CONSISTENCY

One of the principles I have been relying on is a principle of consistency. I have been relying on it because I think that the non-sceptic believes that a belief system should not have inconsistent beliefs; he believes that inconsistency should always be avoided. The

sceptic's argument targets the non-sceptic, using the non-sceptic's mechanism. This justifies the use of the mechanism to deal with the argument. The force of the argument only arises within the perspective of the non-sceptic, therefore the argument can only be studied under the perspective of the non-sceptic. This does not imply that if a non-sceptic held a belief that was inconsistent with the sceptic's conclusion, the non-sceptic could dismiss it. The non-sceptic would have to deal with the resultant inconsistency according to his own mechanism. Something within the belief system would have to be changed to eliminate the inconsistency. As has been argued, the non-sceptic would merely have to abandon a belief that he could determine that his mechanism was reliable (if he held an inconsistent belief). But within reliabilism, it is not immediately clear how beliefs can be inconsistent, or why inconsistency among reliable beliefs must be avoided. That is, it is not clear why holding (or applying) inconsistent beliefs would be an unreliable practice. I will now articulate a notion of inconsistency within reliabilism, and explain why holding inconsistent beliefs produces an unreliable or less than optimal method.

Beliefs are inputs to belief forming mechanisms. Beliefs, relevant to the goals we pursue, are transformed into further beliefs when ran through the mechanism. The mechanism does this in a reliable way, a way that produces an organization or mental state a step further along some path towards goal-satisfaction. Inconsistent beliefs when passed through (or held within) and studied are seen to be *inconsistent*. Frequently, inconsistent beliefs do not have the same form. As an example, consider the belief "Object, O, is a square" and the belief "Object, O, is a circle." Explaining how our mechanism

determines whether these are consistent is simplified positing an intermediate step. The fact that this step *is* taken should be clear upon consideration.

The step is to draw out a belief into its implied beliefs (in a special way). In our case, the belief about O being a circle, can be drawn out into a (special) belief about O *not* being a square. After this step, determining whether a belief is inconsistent is a manageable task for a mechanism. Since our mechanism takes this step (when given the opportunity to engage in prolonged considerations), then describing the nature of inconsistent beliefs is simplified. The fact that our mechanism can hold inconsistent beliefs, detecting them only under prolonged consideration supports this view. If the inconsistency of beliefs of different forms is quickly determined, we must look for evidence that we have considered this inconsistency before. Our mechanism might have stored a belief about this inconsistency. And again, I think this is what we find upon examination.

So, inconsistent beliefs are beliefs that result in some contradiction. The contradiction is easily located by the mechanism because the two beliefs have the same form except for one small difference, the "not". The forms of the beliefs are what influence the mechanism and not their contents; I do not find objects such as miniature birds and trees in my mind, but rather beliefs with various forms. Forming the contradiction took place in the following steps: 1) the location of beliefs relevant to my circumstance, 2) the belief building towards the end of finding similar forms, and 3) the cycles of 1 and 2.

Contradictory beliefs that are relevant to a circumstance would produce a less reliable process. If a belief is relevant to a circumstance, then it is involved in influencing behavior in that circumstance. Generally, for any given circumstance, only some set of beliefs either is relevant or can be considered due to time boundaries. Within this set must be the contradictory beliefs for them to surely produce a less reliable process. As has been said, beliefs influence goal-directed behavior for otherwise they would be of no interest or lacking in semantic content.

Contradictory beliefs impede the influence of beliefs on behavior by dividing the efforts of a mechanism. In a world where a mechanism must be used efficiently to survive, contradictory beliefs are unreliable. This can be seen by a thought experiment. Consider an entity walking in a forest with beliefs that there is a tree in front of him and that there is not. If the beliefs are to be seen as contradictory, they must be applied in the same circumstance. If both applied, then the entity will both be behaving as if the tree were not there and as if it was. Surely, repeated occurrences within a mechanism would naturally phase out the ability to apply contradictory beliefs. Inconsistent beliefs being the originator of contradictory beliefs, they too would need to be phased out for reliability.

V: INSTRUMENTALISM AND INTERNALISM

Beliefs have their content solely in how they affect the behavior of the entity. This is an instrumentalist's position, and I think it is the strongest position because it involves the weakest claims. Beliefs need to be (at least) instrumental; otherwise they would be of no

importance to an entity. By behavior, I do not mean external behavior, but internal behavior. Beliefs influence the behavior of a mind, in how it forms and satisfies goals. It is unnecessary for the mind to be interested in anything else but itself. Within the mind the goals are formed, within the mind the goals are satisfied. The mind is like a world unto itself, and we live there. The state of the external world does not directly matter. What is direct to us is our world; thus our beliefs need only "refer" to that.

But then again, the state of our world may be influenced by the state of the external world. In that case, maintaining our world, would require us to maintain the external world. If this is indeed the case, then there must be linkages between these worlds for otherwise we would not be able to maintain it. There must be access points from the external to the internal, and vice versa. However, we would not need to have access to the form of the external, but only to how our internal behavior influenced our own internal behavior. Behaviors could be reorganized according to *this* feedback. The reorganization need not have any *grasp* of the nature of the external, but only a *grasp* on the influence of internal organization on further internal organization. Science would be explained as a study of the relations between internal organizations. Internal organization O_1 results in internal organization O_2. Clearly, it is unnecessary for us to be referring to anything external.

Furthermore holding that our beliefs refer to external entities would produce inconsistency. There have been many entities about which we have had beliefs (ex. God, monads, the ether) and subsequently have been abandoned. Either these beliefs had

content or they did not. They did influence our behavior, while we had them; so, they must have had content. Yet if beliefs refer to things outside, then they did not. This is inconsistent. The only readily available and plausible view, is that the contents of our beliefs arise from the relations with other beliefs, and in how they influence our internal behavior. Thus the reliabalist, internal conception applied in this paper is quite strong.

SUMMARY

A non-sceptic is right to consider the arguments of the sceptic, because *argument* is part of the belief forming mechanism of the non-sceptic. Ignoring the sceptic's argument is like one ignoring data collected from experiments that do not support his hypothesis. The sceptical argument that was considered in this paper concluded that the reliability of one's mechanism cannot be determined. This conclusion undercuts any attempt at determining the reliability of one's mechanism, because doing so in the face of the sceptical argument results in inconsistency.

The non-sceptic can continue to maintain that his mechanism is reliable, but the non-sceptic cannot continue to argue that it is. The belief in the reliability of the mechanism imposes a condition on what the non-sceptic believes about the world, and trying to *understand* the source of the reliability does not produce inconsistency. A non-sceptic cannot abandon his belief in the reliability of his mechanism on the grounds of the sceptic's argument; a non-sceptic would have to hold that his mechanism is reliable and unreliable at the same time, and this would be inconsistent. This fact is important for any non-sceptic wondering whether the sceptic has the better position. The inconsistency one would have to walk through to get there makes it a worse position.

A principle of consistency is fundamental within our belief forming mechanism. Positing how it works and why this is so, is not difficult. A mechanism need only support the satisifaction of goals. Whether at any given time, a mechanism makes *the truth* accessible, is not necessary nor can it be held, when studied in light of our past mistakes. That is, beliefs that a mechanism produces need only be reliable and not true.

Beliefs must be instrumental in obtaining one's goals, for otherwise they would not have content. One's goals need only refer to internal organizations for these are all that matter to it anyway. Positing that our beliefs refer to external things produces inconsistency, for beliefs about "external" entities such as God and "the ether" have since been dropped, yet we cannot contend that they did not have content, for beliefs about such entities were instrumental in influencing our behavior.

Studying the sceptic's arguments result in an improved belief system for the non-sceptic. The non-sceptic should be aware of the source of his trust in his belief system. The source is nothing like reason. The source is something more like faith. If the non-sceptic ever finds himself in a circumstance that doesn't conform to even his most fundamental belief system, the non-sceptic will be prepared. For the possibility of the unreliability of his mechanism will be known by him.

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