Evidentialist Anti-Skepticism

1. The BIV Argument and How One Might Respond to It

Epistemologists worry about not knowing they have hands. The worry arises from skeptical arguments such as the notorious Brain-in-the-Vat argument, which goes as follows:¹

**The BIV Argument**

(1) KH → K~BIV²
(2) ~K~BIV
(3) ~KH

The first premise can be seen as an implicit appeal to the closure principle, *closure* for short.³ If the underlying assumption is made explicit, the argument goes as follows:

**The BIV Closure Argument**

(1) [KH & K(H → ~BIV)] → K~BIV
(2) K(H → ~BIV)
(3) ~K~BIV
(4) ~KH

When epistemologists worry that the conclusion of this argument might be true, their worries are fueled by the undeniable plausibility of the premises. The first premise is a instance of closure, which is a principle with a degree of plausibility so high that some consider it axiomatic.⁴ The second premise simply states a logical consequence of the BIV hypothesis and is thus completely safe. And the third premise exploits the undeniable difficulties of making a case against a hypothesis that’s deliberately designed to rob one of all possible evidence against it. So it looks like the BIV argument does give epistemologists plenty to worry about.

To rebut the argument, which responses are there to choose from? Here are three:⁵

1. Non-epistemic entitlements, or knowledge without reasons. According to this

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¹ If you are a brain in a vat, your brain was removed from your skull and is kept alive, floating in a vat. The nerve endings of your brain are stimulated in such a way that you have exactly the sort of experiences you would have if you had a normal body and were enjoying a normal life.
² KH=I know I have hands, K~BIV=I know I’m not a BIV.
³ According to the closure principle, we know what our knowledge entails if the entailments themselves are known. So if I know P, and I know that P entails Q, then I know Q. There problems calling for a more cautious articulation of the principle, but these problems may be ignored in the present context. For a defense of closure and a discussion of these problems, see Hawthorne’s "The Case for Closure" in Steup, Matthias and Sosa, Ernest (eds). 2005. *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Malden (MA): Blackwell.
⁵ I’m not mentioning contextualism because, except for one further footnote, it will lie outside the scope of this paper.
response, it’s possible to know that skeptical hypotheses are false without having evidence or reasons against them.⁶

2. Closure denial. This response is associated with either Dretske’s conclusive-reasons theory or Nozick’s sensitivity-based account of knowledge.

3. Evidentialist anti-skepticism. According to this option, appearance notwithstanding, we actually have evidence against the BIV hypothesis, and this evidence is strong enough for knowing that the hypothesis is false.⁷

Of these responses, I think the third is the best. In what follows, I will criticize the first two and defend the third.

I won’t have much to say about the non-epistemic entitlement response. According to it, knowledge requires reasons except when it comes to knowing that skeptical hypotheses are false. So if I am to know I have hands, I have to have good reasons for thinking I have hands. But when it comes to knowing that I’m not a BIV, then I can enjoy such knowledge even though I have no reason at all for thinking that the BIV hypothesis is false. One problem with this approach is that it makes such knowledge mysterious. If knowledge requires reasons except when it comes to knowing that skeptical hypotheses are false, how can my knowledge of not being a BIV be explained? Another problem is arbitrariness. According to the non-epistemic entitlement response, knowledge requires reasons except when it comes to knowing the falsehood of skeptical hypotheses. What justifies making this exception? What we would need for this response to be more attractive is a principled account of when reasons are necessary for knowledge and when they are not. In the absence of such an account, the non-epistemic entitlement suggestion must be rejected as arbitrary.

**2. Dretske’s Denial of Closure Response**

Next, let’s consider the response of denying closure, championed by Fred Dretske.⁸

According to Dretske, your belief that P amounts to knowledge if, and only if, you have a

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conclusive reason for believing P. And your reason for P is conclusive just in case, if P were false, you wouldn’t have that reason. Your hand-like experiences give you a conclusive reason for believing that you have hands, for if you didn’t have hands you wouldn’t have those experiences. However, your hand-like experiences don’t give you a conclusive reason for thinking you are not a BIV. They do not because if you were a BIV, you would still have those experiences. The same applies to any other reason you might have for thinking you are not a BIV. The BIV hypothesis is designed to ensure that, no matter what anti-BIV reason we consider, you would still have it even if you were a BIV. So reasons for thinking you are not a BIV cannot be conclusive. And thus we get the outcome that, although you know you have hands, and you know that your having hands entails your not being a BIV, you don’t know that you are not a BIV.

According to one familiar objection to this response, it engenders an abominable conjunction: I know I have hands, but I don’t know that I’m not a handless BIV. Later on I’ll mention a few more abominable conjunctions. For now, I want to press a different objection. To me, it seems a main flaw with Dretske’s approach is that it restricts the scope of knowledge too much. To begin with, as a response to skepticism, Dretske’s theory is quite concessive. It concedes that we cannot know skeptical hypotheses to be false. The claimed benefit of this concession is that ordinary knowledge—such as knowledge of one’s hands—is preserved. But, on Dretske’s theory, how much of ordinary knowledge is really secure? For example, do I now know, according to Dretske’s theory, that there is a desk in my office on campus? I am now in my study at home, not in my office on campus. Hence my reason for believing there’s a desk in my office is not a present desk-like experience but rather memories of past desk-like experiences plus a bit of background knowledge: desks are rarely removed from faculty offices. But that reason—the combination of remembered perceptual experiences and general knowledge of desk-removal on campuses—is not conclusive: had my desk been removed or stolen, I would still have that reason. What, according to Dretske’s theory, I do know is that last time I looked there was a desk in my office. But I do not know that there is now a desk in my office. It seems to me, though, that this is something I know. That’s why I think Dretske’s theory is too restrictive.

Here’s something else I think I know, but don’t know according to Dretske’s theory. I think

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I now know that there is not now an atomic bomb in my basement. My reason for believing that there isn’t an atomic bomb in my basement consists of a set of premises about atomic bombs: They are very difficult to acquire. People who have them legally keep them within the confines of military installations. People who have them illegally are unlikely to put them in my basement. But of course these reasons are not conclusive. If due to fantastic coincidence, an atomic bomb had found its way into my basement, I would still have these reasons. So Dretske’s theory implies that I do not know that there is not now an atomic bomb in my basement. According to Dretske, if I want to know whether or not there is an atomic bomb in my basement, I would have to go and look. Until then, I remain in a state of ignorance. Once again, it seems to me Dretske’s account is too restrictive.

Like Dretske, I would say that having knowledge requires having a reason. But unlike Dretske, I think that for a reason to give you knowledge, it need not be conclusive. That doesn’t mean any old reason can give you knowledge. There are reasons that, while they make believing P more reasonable than not believing P, are not strong enough to give you knowledge of P. My reasons for thinking that I will be alive one year from now are an example of that. How strong, then, must a reason for P be if that reason is to give one knowledge of P? According to the kind of antiskeptical evidentialism defended here, a reason is good enough for knowledge if it eliminates all reasonable doubt. My reasons for thinking that there is a desk in my office, and that there is not an atomic bomb in my basement, eliminate, it seems to me, all reasonable doubt. That’s why I think I know these things.

Dretske thinks that knowledge of P always results from indicators that carry the information that P is true. Indicators are perceptual experiences, memories, as well as various forms of testimony: newspaper articles, books, and what people tell me. I would of course agree that such indicators can give us knowledge. The question is whether they are the only things that can give us knowledge. It seems to me in addition to such indicators, there is something else that can give us knowledge: reasoning applied to propositions expressing bits of common knowledge. But as the two examples I mentioned show, such reasoning need not be conclusive. Dretske would therefore deny that it can give us knowledge; I would insist that it can.

In response to my view, I think Dretske would reply that, even if I’m that liberal about what it takes to know, I will still not be able to rebut the BIV argument. For no matter how
liberal an account of knowledge is, it will not allow for knowledge of not being a BIV. Hence, according to Dretske, there is only one successful way of rebutting this argument: to give up closure, that is, to claim knowledge of one’s hands while admitting one can’t know one is not a BIV. I disagree with that, and I will now proceed to explain why.

3. Why We Might Think We Don’t Know We Are Not BIVs

Many epistemologists think that the third premise of the BIV Closure argument is extremely plausible. The more one thinks about it, the more plausible it becomes. These epistemologists seem to be convinced that at least one of the following two theses is true:

1. The No-Evidence-At-All Thesis
One has no evidence at all for thinking that one is not a BIV.

*Generalized:* If according to a skeptical hypothesis, H, one’s evidence is the same as it is now, then one has no evidence at all against H.

2. The No-Evidence-That’s-Good-Enough-for-Knowledge Thesis
One has some evidence for thinking one is not a BIV, but that evidence is not good enough for knowledge.

*Generalized:* If according to a skeptical hypothesis, H, one’s evidence is the same as it is now, then one has no evidence that’s good enough for knowing ~H.

The rationale for the No-Evidence-At-All thesis is obvious: A person who undergoes envatment does not undergo any change of her evidence. So after envatment, one has exactly the same evidence one used to have before envatment. Consequently, one cannot have any evidence for thinking one is not a BIV.10

Those who favor the Not-Good-Enough thesis assert that we have *some* reasons for thinking we are not envatted. For example, it would appear the technology for keeping a brain alive for an extended period does not yet exist. However, advocates of the Not-Good-Enough thesis would hasten to add that such evidence doesn’t do what evidence must do if it is to give us knowledge: protect us in a robust way against error. It does not so protect us because if we were BIVs we would still think that the technology needed for envatment is not available. The same holds for any evidential item that could be brought to bear against the BIV hypothesis. Dretske would say that such evidential items do not add up to conclusive reasons. Therefore, whatever anti-BIV evidence we might have, it isn’t good enough for us to know that the BIV

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hypothesis is false.

4. Easter Bunny Deception

Both theses strike me as false. For an assessment of their plausibility, I recommend considering a different type of skeptical scenario, one in which one is envatted or otherwise deceived not by a mad scientist or some sinister state or rogue agency, but rather by the Easter Bunny. If one is a BIV, one thinks one has hands while in fact one does not. The same is going on if the Easter Bunny is agent of deception. Being handless, and indeed being altogether disembodied, the Easter Bunny’s victim labors under the illusion of having a normal body. The Easter Bunny deception analog to the BIV argument, then, runs as follows:

The Easter Bunny Deception Argument

1. \([HK \& K(H \rightarrow \sim EBD)] \rightarrow K \sim EBD\)\(^{11}\)
2. \(K(H \rightarrow \sim EBD)\)
3. \(\sim K \sim EBD\)
4. \(\sim KH\)

How would one want to respond to this argument? I’m inclined to think most people take themselves to know that the Easter Bunny does not exist. I, in any case, take myself to know this. Assuming, then, we all think we know the Easter Bunny does not exist, we might wonder on the basis of what evidence we have acquired this bit of knowledge. Let me just mention one evidential item among many: having paws, bunnies lack the manual dexterity required for distributing and hiding eggs.\(^{12}\) Of course, if we think that knowledge requires truth-entailing evidence, then the paw argument is no good at all. But, obviously, if we take ourselves to know that the Easter Bunny does not exist, then we don’t think that knowledge requires truth-entailing evidence – which is to say we are endorsing fallibilism. According to fallibilist evidentialism, if evidence is to give us knowledge, it need not be truth-entailing, but it must

\(^{11}\) EBD=Easter Bunny deception (I am deceived by the Easter Bunny into thinking I have hands (a body) when in fact I do not. K~EBD=I know there is no Easter Bunny deception (I know that I’m not deceived by the Easter Bunny).

\(^{12}\) Here are a few more reasons for thinking the Easter Bunny does not exist: The single Easter Bunny problem: one solitary Easter Bunny can’t distribute Easter eggs on a semi-global scale; the language and intelligence problem: the task of semi-global Easter egg distribution could not be pulled off by creatures who have the linguistic ability and level of intelligence characteristic of bunnies; the distributive interaction problem: in the course of Easter egg distribution, multiple encounters between humans and the Easter Bunny would be unavoidable, encounters that would clearly establish the Easter Bunny’s existence; the media problem: if the Easter Bunny did exist, we would expect both scientific and popular literature about the Easter Bunny. Finding still further reasons should be an easily accomplishable task.
eliminate all reasonable doubt. I take it our evidence leaves no reasonable doubt as to the Easter Bunny’s nonexistence. That’s why, according to fallibilist evidentialism, we know that the Easter Bunny does not exist.

Let’s suppose, then, we agree that the following thesis is true:

**The Easter Bunny Nonexistence Thesis**
We have evidence for Easter Bunny nonexistence that’s good enough for knowledge.

What’s interesting about this thesis is this: if you think it is true, and if you think your body of knowledge can be enlarged using deduction, then you should reject the No-Evidence-At-All and the Not-Good-Enough thesis. Consider first the general form of the No-Evidence-At-All thesis:

**The No-Evidence-At-All Thesis**
If, according to a skeptical hypothesis, H, one’s evidence is the same as it is now, one has no evidence at all against H.

Here is why this thesis is false. In a world in which you are deceived by the Easter Bunny, your evidence is the same as it is in this world. In this world, you have excellent evidence for thinking that the Easter Bunny does not exist. Hence, in a world in which you are deceived by the Easter Bunny, you also have excellent evidence for thinking that the Easter Bunny does not exist. Next, imagine yourself the Easter Bunny’s hapless victim. It occurs to you that you can work on your evidence using deduction. You reason as follows:

**The Easter Bunny Nondeception Closure Step**
The Easter Bunny does not exist.
If so, I’m not deceived by the Easter Bunny.
Therefore:
I’m not deceived by the Easter Bunny.

And so it turns out that even if you were deceived by the Easter Bunny, you would have an excellent argument for believing that you are not deceived by the Easter Bunny. So it looks like we may put forward the following thesis:

**The We-Have-Evidence Thesis**
We have excellent evidence for thinking that the Easter Bunny deception hypothesis is false even though, if that hypothesis were true, our evidence would be exactly the same as it is now.

The We-Have-Evidence thesis strikes me as true. It seems to me, therefore, that the No-Evidence-At-All thesis is false.

Next, consider the Not-Good-Enough thesis, which in its general form says the following:
The No-Evidence-That’s-Good-Enough-for-Knowledge Thesis

If according to a skeptical hypothesis, H, one’s evidence is the same as it is now, one has no evidence that’s good enough for knowing \( \sim H \).

Let’s assume we are in agreement about the following: we have evidence good enough for knowing that the Easter Bunny doesn’t exist. Now each of us can perform a little deduction: If one knows that the Easter Bunny doesn’t exist, then one knows one is not deceived by the Easter Bunny. This looks like a rather safe step. It is not a complex and lengthy piece of reasoning that weakens the evidence to which it is applied. So if our anti-Easter-Bunny-existence evidence gives us knowledge of the Easter Bunny’s nonexistence, one should think that, performing the little deduction just mentioned, that very same evidence puts us in a position to know we are not deceived by the Easter Bunny. Let’s put this point in the form of another thesis:

The We-Know-It Thesis

We know that the Easter Bunny Deception Hypothesis is false even though, if that hypothesis were true, our evidence would be exactly the same as it is now.

If the We-Know-It thesis is true, then the Not-Good-Enough thesis is false. Since the We-Know-It thesis is exceedingly plausible, it seems to me it supplies us with a good reason to reject the Not-Good-Enough thesis.

The arguments for the We-Have-Evidence and the We-Know-It theses presuppose that we can expand our stock of knowledge using deduction. So they rely on closure. Dretske doesn’t hold that we can never use deduction to expand our stock of knowledge. However, he would deny that, using Easter Bunny nonexistence as our starting point, we can, using deduction, come to know that we are not victims of Easter Bunny deception. Deduction does not generate knowledge when it comes to consequences for which we lack conclusive reasons. That’s why, on Dretske’s view, closure fails. What’s nice about the deceptive Easter Bunny and other deceivers of the same ilk is the following: They illustrate just how painful it is to accept closure failure, at least when it comes to obviously non-existing agents of deception. For the position Dretske advocates implies conjunctions as abominable as the following:

Closure Denial Costs

- You know that the Easter Bunny does not exist, but you don’t know that you are not deceived by the Easter Bunny.
- You know that Napoleon is dead, but you don’t know that you are not deceived by

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13 See Dretske’s “The Case Against Closure,” loc. cit.
Napoleon.

- You know that dinosaurs are extinct, but you don’t know that you are not deceived by some dinosaur.

As far as abominable conjunctions go, these are particularly egregious. It seems to me we should avoid them and agree that, if one knows the Easter Bunny doesn’t exist, then one also knows one is not deceived by the Easter Bunny. But then the following, rather effective response to the Easter Bunny Deception argument becomes available to us:

**The Easter Bunny Deception Counter-Argument**

1. \(K\sim\text{EBE}\)
2. \(K(\sim\text{EBE} \rightarrow \sim\text{EBD})\)
3. \([K\sim\text{EBE} \& K(\sim\text{EBE} \rightarrow \sim\text{EBD})] \rightarrow K\sim\text{EBD}\)
4. \(K\sim\text{EBD}\)

The short version of this argument goes like this: I know I am not deceived by the Easter Bunny because the Easter Bunny does not exist. The Easter Bunny nonexistence response to the Easter Bunny Deception argument is based on fallibilist evidentialism. According to this view, the standard we must meet to know is high, but not excessively high: we must be in possession of evidence that eliminates all reasonable doubt. There is no reasonable doubt about the Easter Bunny’s nonexistence. Nor is there reasonable doubt about the relevant entailment. Hence one knows that the Easter Bunny deception hypothesis is false.

5. **Rebutting the BIV Argument**

We have now reached the end of our detour through the territory of Easter Bunny skepticism. Next, let’s see whether BIV skepticism can be dealt with in an analogous fashion. So let’s consider the following reply to the BIV argument:

**The BIV Counter-Argument**

1. \(K\sim\text{BIVE}\)
2. \(K(\sim\text{BIVE} \rightarrow \sim\text{BIV})\)
3. \([K\sim\text{BIVE} \& K(\sim\text{BIVE} \rightarrow \sim\text{BIV})] \rightarrow K\sim\text{BIV}\)
4. \(K\sim\text{BIV}\)

The second premise seems rather innocuous. If BIVs don’t exist, then I’m not a BIV. That’s certainly beyond any reasonable doubt. So let’s move on to the first premise. Is there any reasonable doubt as to the nonexistence of BIVs? Let’s dwell for a moment on the relevant

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14 EBE = Easter Bunny existence; K~EBE=I know the Easter Bunny does not exist.

15 BIVE = BIV existence. K~BIVE=I know that BIVs don’t exist.
evidence. Items that come to mind are the following:

1. Textbooks of neurophysiology don’t have a chapter entitled ‘Envatment’.
2. Departments of neurophysiology don’t offer courses entitled ‘Envatment 101’.
3. If you bother to call a renowned neurophysiologist or brain surgeon and ask whether envatment is possible, the answer is going to be ‘no’.
4. Essay collections for courses on applied ethics don’t have a chapter entitled ‘The ethics of envatment’.
5. No known episode of 60 Minutes has ever investigated let alone asserted the existence of BIVs.
6. There is no known case of someone ever having been sued for or found guilty of envatting a person.

This list could go on. If one puts enough effort into it, it could fill pages. Now, obviously even the collective force of such a list does not entail the nonexistence of BIVs. Not does such a list give us conclusive reasons for the nonexistence of BIVs. But surely it eliminates all reasonable doubt about their nonexistence. The proposition that there are no BIVs, then, meets the standard of knowledge that fallibilist evidentialism endorses. We know that BIVs don’t exist, and hence, performing an easy deduction, we can know that we are not victims of envatment.

This could change. Perhaps at some point in the future, envatment will be a wide-spread and much reported phenomenon. Then it’s going to be more difficult to know one is not a BIV. We are not there yet, though. It’s like the difference between living in West-Lafayette, Indiana, and living in a crime infested metropolis. In West-Lafayette, I know my car is where I parked it. In a crime infested metropolis, I might not. Likewise, in this world we know we are not envatted. In a world in which envatment is common place, it might be difficult to know this.

Let me review the salient points. I think the best response to BIV skepticism goes like this. We have excellent evidence for thinking that BIVs don’t exist, evidence that eliminates all reasonable doubt about BIV nonexistence. We have such evidence even though our overall evidence would be the same if we were BIVs. Therefore, the No-Evidence-At-All thesis is false. Using BIV nonexistence as a premise, an easy deduction allows us to infer that, if BIVs don’t exist, we are not BIVs. Anti-BIV-existence evidence thus becomes anti-BIV-deception evidence. But is our anti-BIV-deception evidence good enough to know we are not BIVs? Since the deduction in question is simple and rationally compelling, there is no reason to deny
that we know we are not BIVs by deducing it from the nonexistence of BIVs. We should, therefore, reject the Not-Good-enough thesis. If Dretske’s conclusive reasons requirement were true, the inference from BIV nonexistence to one’s not being a BIV would be blocked. However, Dretske’s conclusive reasons requirement is not obviously true. To the contrary, it is highly problematic. If we reject it, no obstacle remains to saying that we can know we are not BIVs by deducing it from the nonexistence of BIVs.16

6. Does Evidentialist Anti-Skepticism Beg the Question?

Some would argue that the BIV nonexistence argument begs the question. I do not think, however, that the charge of question begging sticks in any obvious way. I this section, I’ll argue that the charge doesn’t stick.

Why, then, think that the BIV nonexistence argument begs the question? The reason, I take it, would be that the argument appeals to the premise that I know BIVs don’t exist. The skeptic would of course argue that, since I don’t know I’m not a BIV, I don’t know that BIVs don’t exist. So in advancing the BIV nonexistence response, I rely on a premise the truth of which the skeptic is not prepared to grant. However, the skeptic uses a premise the truth of which I am not prepared to grant, namely the premise that I don’t know I’m not a BIV. It is of course true that, if I really don’t know that I’m not a BIV, then I don’t know that BIVs don’t exist. But it is also true that, if I really know BIVs don’t exist, then I do know I’m not a BIV. This symmetrical structure reveals itself when we compare the two arguments in question:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIV Counter-Argument</th>
<th>Skeptical Reply</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) K<del>BIVE → K</del>BIV</td>
<td>(1) K<del>BIVE → K</del>BIV</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) K~BIVE</td>
<td>(2) <del>K</del>BIV</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) K~BIV</td>
<td>(3) <del>K</del>BIVE</td>
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According to the anti-skeptical argument on the left, I know I’m not a BIV because I know BIVs don’t exist. According to the skeptical reply on the right, I don’t know BIVs don’t exist because I don’t know I’m not a BIV. The second premise of each of these arguments denies the premise that I know BIVs don’t exist. This symmetrical structure reveals itself when we compare the two arguments in question:

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16 The reader might wonder how the response to skepticism advocated here is related to the contextualism. According to contextualism, skepticism is correct in conversational contexts in which a high standard of knowledge is in operation, whereas anti-skepticism is correct in low standard contexts. Ignore the questions of whether contextualists are right the way the standards of knowledge shift from one context to another and focus on this: according to contextualism, closure is true. Clearly, then, contextualists need to explain how, in low standard contexts, it is possible to know one is not a BIV, or at least to have the evidence needed for knowing one is not a BIV. Evidentialist antiskepticism, as defended here, can be viewed as a strategy for providing that explanation.
conclusion of the other argument. What we are seeing is a clash between the skeptic’s *modus tollens* and the anti-skeptic’s *modus ponens*. In light of this symmetrical structure, why assume the BIV counter-argument begs the question? To get to the bottom of the issue, I suggest to proceed as follows: Since both arguments share the same first premise, we should judge the respective merit of each argument by comparing the plausibility of each argument’s second premise. The issue of question begging, then, comes down to this: What is more plausible, the skeptic’s premise that I don’t know I’m not a BIV, or the anti-skeptical premise that I know BIVs don’t exist?

To approach answering this question, let’s examine two more pairs of arguments, thus generating an anti-skeptical slippery slope. Consider first how the skeptic would respond to the Easter Bunny deception counter-argument:

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<tr>
<th>The EB Deception Counter-Argument</th>
<th>Skeptical Reply</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) K¬EBE → K¬EBD</td>
<td>(1) K¬EBE → K¬EBD</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) K¬EBE</td>
<td>(2) ¬K¬EBD</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) K¬EBD</td>
<td>(3) ¬K¬EBE</td>
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According to the argument against Easter Bunny deception, I know I’m not deceived by the Easter Bunny because I know the Easter Bunny does not exist. According to the skeptical response, I don’t know that the Easter Bunny does not exist because I don’t know that I’m not deceived by the Easter Bunny. To assess whether the Easter Bunny-nonexistence response is question begging, we need to focus on the second premise of each argument: What’s more reasonable of me to believe: (a) that I know the Easter Bunny doesn’t exist, or (b) that I fail to know that I’m not deceived by the Easter Bunny? The suggestion I should abandon (a) on the basis of (b) seems silly, precisely because, as already mentioned above, there is no reasonable doubt as to the Easter Bunny’s nonexistence. So my anti-Easter Bunny evidence gives me excellent reasons for preferring (a) over (b). Therefore, I can hardly be accused of question-begging when I argue I know I’m not deceived by the Easter Bunny because I know that the Easter Bunny does not exist.

Next, consider a completely absurd skeptical argument, the round-square-deception argument. It goes like this: “If I know I have hands, I know I’m not deceived by a round square. But I don’t know that I’m not deceived by a round square. Therefore, I don’t know that I have hands.” Now consider the following two arguments:
The Round Square Deception

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<tr>
<th>Counter Argument</th>
<th>Skeptical Reply</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) K<del>RSE → K</del>RSD</td>
<td>(1) K<del>RSE → K</del>RSD</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) K~RSE</td>
<td>(2) <del>K</del>RSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) K~RSD</td>
<td>(3) <del>K</del>RSE</td>
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I say I know I’m not deceived by a round square because I know round squares don’t exist. The skeptic replies I don’t know round squares don’t exist because I don’t know I’m not deceived by a round square. Once again, we need to focus on the second premise of each argument.

What’s more reasonable of me to believe: (c) that I know round squares don’t exist, or (d) that I don’t know that I’m not deceived by a round square. Obviously, it is (c). The nonexistence of round squares cannot seriously be called into question. So when I prefer (c) to (d), there is no question for me to beg. Therefore, I do not beg the question when I argue I know I’m not deceived by a round square because I know that round squares don’t exist.

It is difficult to take round square skepticism seriously. But when we consider BIV skepticism, it is perhaps not easy to see whether the skeptic or the anti-skeptic has the upper hand. To clear this up, we can employ the device of a slippery slope. At the end of the slippery slope, the light of reason shines brightly. Here, we are observing a skeptical argument that can only be classified as preposterous. Round square skepticism is not a serious challenge. It is a mere play with words, utterly lacking in substance. Again: the nonexistence of round squares is not something that can reasonably be called into question.\(^{17}\) The round-square-nonexistence argument, therefore, does not qualify as an instance of begging the question.

Now consider BIV skepticism, located at the other end of the slope. If BIV skepticism is a serious challenge and evidentialist anti-skepticism begs the question against it, then something must have changed on the way up during the transition from round-square skepticism to Easter Bunny skepticism to BIV skepticism. What might have changed? Perhaps it is the strength of the evidence. So perhaps the following diagnosis is true:

1. The evidence against the existence of round squares is as strong as it can get. There is no reasonable doubt as to the nonexistence of round squares. Therefore, round-square skepticism is unreasonable. The anti-skeptic does not beg the question

\(^{17}\) Of course there might be good reasons to become suspicious of our modal intuitions. But round square deception is not among them.
against it.

2. The evidence against the Easter Bunny’s existence is not quite as strong, but still very strong, eliminating all reasonable doubt. Therefore, Easter Bunny skepticism is unreasonable. The anti-skeptic does not beg the question against it.

3. But when it comes to evidence against the existence of BIVs, we witness a catastrophic weakening. The nonexistence of BIVs is very much in doubt. BIV skepticism is, therefore, reasonable, and the anti-skeptic begs the question against it.

While I find myself in agreement with the first two steps of this diagnosis, I must reject the third. I don’t think there is a catastrophic weakening of the evidence when it comes to the nonexistence of BIVs as opposed to the nonexistence of round squares or the nonexistence of the Easter Bunny. Rather, I think there is plenty of evidence making the assertion of BIV nonexistence reasonable. So my view is that, while the strength of the evidence diminishes with each step on the slippery slope, it does so only in very small increments. No changes occur that dramatically change the picture when we move from round square skepticism to BIV skepticism. Hence I suggest to replace the third part of the diagnosis to:

3* When it comes to evidence against the existence of BIVs, no significant weakening has taken place. There is, therefore, no reasonable doubt as to the nonexistence of BIVs. BIV skepticism is, therefore, unreasonable, and the anti-skeptic does not beg the question against it.

Critics of evidentialist anti-skepticism who wish to oppose my line of reasoning are confronted with a dilemma. Consider the following thesis:

**The No-Dramatic-Change Thesis**

None of the steps of the slippery slope from round square to Easter Bunny to BIV skepticism involves a dramatic weakening of the evidence.

Skeptics who wish to reject my slippery slope argument face a dilemma: for skeptics, neither accepting nor rejecting the No-Dramatic-Change thesis will be an easy option. If they accept the thesis, they must either abandon skepticism or embrace round square skepticism. If, on the other hand, they reject the thesis, they incur the obligation to identify a change significant enough to rehabilitate BIV skepticism while accepting the obvious failure of round square skepticism.

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18 At least, there is plenty such evidence under the present circumstances. It’s easy to imagine circumstances where such evidence is absent.
skepticism. It is not easy to see, however, exactly where that change might occur.

7. Two Objections
It could be objected that a dramatic change does occur. It occurs at the transition from round square skepticism to Easter Bunny skepticism. Skeptical hypotheses, if effective, must be logically consistent, representing genuine possibilities. Round square deception does not meet this requirement, and thus is not suitable for the skeptic’s purposes.

There are two problems with this objection. First, if we say that a dramatic change occurs at the transition from round square to Easter Bunny skepticism, we assign, as a consequence, too much credit to the latter. It is of course true that, unlike a deceiving round square, a deceiving Easter Bunny is at least logically possible. But that doesn’t mean the Easter Bunny deception hypothesis needs to be taken seriously. Though round square deception is even less plausible than Easter Bunny deception, certainly the difference is way too small to have the result of making Easter Bunny skepticism look good by way of comparison.

Second, we should bear in mind that we are, after all, liable to make mistakes about what’s logically possible and what’s not. Therefore, propositions that strike us as necessarily true are not immune to doubt just because of the modal status we attribute to them. In principle, it is possible for the skeptic to cast doubt on the reliability of our modal intuitions. Whether such doubts are to be taken seriously depends on the error possibilities the skeptic appeals to. If the skeptic were to present us with empirical data suggesting that our modal intuitions are in general unreliable, then we would be confronted with a serious worry. If, however, the skeptic presents us with the hypothesis that we are deceived by a round square into thinking that round squares don’t exist, then there is no reason to worry. The explanation of why there is no reason to worry is not the shift from empirical to logical implausibility but the obviousness of the implausibility of the error possibility in question. If a skeptical argument is to succeed, the skeptical hypothesis it is based on must itself be plausible or at least not be implausible. That is what matters. What does not matter is whether the skeptical hypothesis targets our empirical evidence or our modal intuitions. I therefore reject the claim that a dramatic change takes place at the transition from round square to Easter Bunny skepticism.

According to the second objection, I am too confident in my negative assessment of Easter Bunny and round square skepticism. Why not let the direction of the argument go the other
way? Why not, that is, argue as follows: “Since I don’t know I’m not a BIV, I don’t know that BIVs don’t exist. Since that’s an unassailable starting point, epistemological reflection tells us we must employ analogous reasoning when it comes to a deceiving Easter Bunny or a deceiving round square. Starting with the plausibility of BIV skepticism, I should conclude that, since I don’t know that I’m not deceived by the Easter Bunny, I don’t know that the Easter Bunny does not exist, and that, since I don’t know I’m not deceived by a round square, I don’t know that round squares don’t exist. So instead of undermining BIV skepticism, what the slippery slope does is illustrate how strong and far-reaching the skeptic’s position really is.”

Here is my response to this objection. BIV skepticism rests on the premise that I don’t know I’m not a BIV. This premise, unless the slide down the slippery slope comes to a stop somewhere, ultimately comes into tension with the anti-skeptical premise that I know round squares don’t exist. So looking at the starting point and the end point of the slippery slope, we are comparing (1) I don’t know I’m not a BIV, and (2) I know round squares don’t exist. According to the objection under consideration, it would be dogmatic to protect (2) by rejecting (1). To me, it seems the opposite is true. If (1) was at least as plausible as the nonexistence of round squares, the objection might have a point. But surely, the credibility of (1) rises nowhere near the certainty of round square nonexistence. To the contrary, (1) is a problematic premise in need of support. What epistemologists have said in support of this premise is highly debatable. If knowledge requires infallible evidence, or if knowledge requires a conclusive reason, then it follows of course that one doesn’t know one is not a BIV. But none of these requirements are uncontroversial. Likewise, if the No-Evidence-At-All thesis or the Not-Good-Enough thesis were true, then, from an evidentialist point of view, it would be impossible to know that one is not a BIV. I have argued, however, that both of these theses are false. According to the evidentialist approach I have been advocating, knowledge results from the possession of evidence that eliminates all reasonable doubt. From that point of view, asserting that one is unable to know one is not a BIV is not an innocuous starting point but rather a deeply problematic claim, one that, in light of the slippery slope (towards ridiculous consequences) it engenders, should be rejected.

8. What Would be Begging the Question?
I have argued that, if one argues for knowledge of one’s hands and of one’s not being a BIV
using BIV nonexistence as a premise, one does not beg the question against BIV skepticism. In this section, I will consider an argument that I am inclined to think does beg the question: the I-have-hands response: I know I am not a handless BIV tricked into believing I have hands because I know I have hands. The challenge will be to explain why the BIV nonexistence response does not beg the question whereas the I-have-hands response does.

Let’s begin by looking at an example that nicely illustrates the difference between begging and not begging the question. Suppose I believe about a table before me, on the basis of its looking red to me:

(1) The table is red.

Suppose further someone confronts me with the following skeptical alternative:

(2) The table is white and illuminated by red light.

Finally, suppose I respond to this challenge by saying I know the table isn’t white and illuminated by red light because I know it is red. That, I think, would be begging the question.

But why?

Here is an initial answer. Knowledge of the table’s redness is the very thing the hypothesis ‘The table is white and illuminated by red lights’ threatens. But one cannot defeat a skeptical hypothesis by appealing to the very knowledge the hypothesis is intended to threaten or call into doubt. That’s why appealing to knowledge of the table’s redness is not the right response to defeating the red light hypothesis. If I wish to avoid begging the question about the table’s color, what I need to do is defeat the skeptical hypothesis by citing a reason against that hypothesis that is not itself threatened or undermined by the hypothesis, such as:

(3) There are no red lights present.

If I don’t have evidence in support of (3), then the table’s looking red does not put me in a position to know it is red. But if, on the basis of such evidence, I come to know that (3) is true, then the red light hypothesis is defeated, and the table’s looking red gives me knowledge of its being red.

Generalizing from this example, we might be inclined to think that what is sufficient for rendering an argument question-begging is the attempt to defeat a skeptical hypothesis by

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19 The kind of skepticism here would of course be local. Its point would not be to call into question all of our empirical knowledge, but merely to undermine knowledge of the table’s color on a particular occasion.

appealing to premises knowledge of which the hypothesis is meant to threaten. So to avoid question-begging, one must attack the hypothesis using premises that the hypothesis fails to threaten or potentially undermine, such as, in our present example, a premise asserting the absence of red lights. However, such an account of question-begging is subject to counterexamples. Here are two arguments that do not beg the question:

**Easter Bunny Nonexistence:** I am not deceived by the Easter Bunny into thinking that the Easter Bunny does not exist because the Easter Bunny does not exist.

**Round Square Nonexistence:** I am not deceived by a round square into thinking that round squares don’t exist because round squares don’t exist.

If we think of question-begging as a solely structural matter—a matter of not appealing to any premises a skeptical hypothesis threatens—both of these arguments must be classified as question-begging. Knowledge of the Easter Bunny’s nonexistence is the very thing the Easter Bunny deception hypothesis is meant to undermine. Hence, on our present account, the argument must be classified as question-begging. Likewise, knowledge of the nonexistence of round squares is the very thing the round square deception hypothesis is meant to threaten. So, we might think, we can’t defeat this hypothesis by appealing to the nonexistence of round squares. So if *defeating a skeptical hypothesis using premises knowledge of which the hypothesis is meant to threaten* is indeed sufficient for rendering an argument question-begging, then, it would appear, both of the arguments displayed above are question-begging—when in fact they are not.

How can the two arguments be vindicated? I suggest that we need to replace the solely structural account of question-begging considered above with an evidentialist one. According to this alternative account, for an argument to beg the question, there must be, relative to the evidence on which the argument is based, a question to be begged. But our evidential situation is such that there are no questions to be begged when it comes to the nonexistence of the Easter Bunny or the nonexistence of round squares. How can, in general terms, such an evidentialist account of question-begging be articulated? Here is a suggestion:

**Question Begging:** An antiskeptical argument, based on a premise P justified by evidence E, begs the question against a skeptical alternative, A, if and only if (i) A is intended to undermine P; (ii) E fails to favor P over A.

Consider again the example of the red table. Here, the skeptical alternative is that the table is
white and illuminated by red light, which threatens or potentially undermines the proposition that the table is red. If I argue against the alternative using ‘The table is red’ as a premise, E consists of a visual experience: the table’s looking red to me. This bit of evidence, by itself, gives to me no reason to favor ‘The table is red’ over ‘The table is white and illuminated by red light’. In contrast, suppose I rebut the skeptical alternative by appealing to E+: the table looks red to me and it appears to me that there are no red lights present. Clearly, E+ gives me a reason to favor ‘The table is red’ over ‘The table is white and illuminated by red lights.

Let us now consider the I-have-hands response that I claim does, unlike the BIV-nonexistence response, beg the question against the BIV hypothesis. The I-have-hands response goes like this:

I know I am not a handless BIV tricked into believing I have hands because—on the basis of hand-like experiences—I know I have hands.

The evidence on which the asserted knowledge of my hands is based consists of hand-like experiences. But that evidence by itself does not give me no reason to favor ‘I have hands’ over ‘I am a handless BIV tricked into believing I have hands’. Therefore, the hands response to the BIV argument begs the question. Next, compare the hands response with the BIV nonexistence response:

I know that I have hands and am not a handless BIV tricked into believing I have hands because I have hand-like experiences and plenty of evidence in support of BIV nonexistence.

Now the evidence brought to bear against the skeptical alternative is not just hand-like experiences, but an enlarged body of evidence: hand-like experience plus the total body of evidence supporting BIV nonexistence. This enlarged body of evidence entitles me to favor ‘I have hands’ over ‘I am a handless BIV tricked into believing that I have hands’. Initially, it might appear as though the BIV-nonexistence response begs the question against the BIV hypothesis because the BIV hypothesis is meant to undermine (among other things) my knowledge of BIV nonexistence. However, according to the account of question-begging I have proposed, I beg the question only if the total body of evidence I am appealing to fails to favor the challenged proposition—‘I have hands’ in our present example—over the skeptical alternative. But this is not true of the argument we are considering. BIV-nonexistence evidence defeats the BIV hypothesis and, together with hand-like experiences, grounds knowledge of
one’s hands. Therefore, the account I have proposed identifies, as I believe correctly, the I-have-hands response as question-begging and the BIV-nonexistence response as a non-question begging.\textsuperscript{21}

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