

How to undercut radical skepticism

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Abstract Radical skepticism relies on the hypothesis that one could be completely cut off from the external world. In this paper, I argue that this hypothesis can be rationally motivated by means of a conceivability argument. Subsequently, I submit that this conceivability argument does not furnish a good reason to believe that one could be completely cut off from the external world. To this end, I show that we cannot adequately conceive scenarios that verify the radical skeptical hypothesis. Attempts to do so fall prey to one or another of three pitfalls: they end up incomplete, reveal a deep contradiction or recreate a non-skeptical hypothesis. I use these results to improve upon Pritchard's (Epistemological disjunctivism. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012; Epistemic angst: radical scepticism and the groundlessness of our believing, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016) recent attempt at undercutting radical skepticism.

Keywords Radical skepticism · Modal epistemology · Epistemology of perception · Imagination

If you were in a radical skeptical scenario, you would be completely cut off from the external world and know nothing or very little about it. Here is a familiar illustration of this predicament:

(BIV) *The Brain in a Vat*

Your brain has been removed and placed in a vat with nutrients and its nerve endings have been connected to a computer. This computer feeds your brain with experiences that are indiscriminable from your experiences when you

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were embodied, before the operation took place. In this scenario, you lack much of the everyday empirical knowledge you take yourself to have: that there is a banana before you, that you have two hands, and so on (Pritchard 2005: 24; see also Putnam 1981).

Scenarios of this sort have often been used to formulate paradoxes (Byrne 2004; Pritchard 2012, 2014, 2016; Stroud 1984). A paradox arises from a set of propositions that strike us as individually true but collectively entail a contradiction. Although there are different formulations of the putative radical skeptical paradox, many of them exploit the following intuition:

The modal intuition

Even if you are in a paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge, you *could* be in a radical skeptical scenario.

By a ‘paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge’ I mean a situation in which the agent’s cognitive and perceptual capacities are functioning properly, the observation conditions are normal, and she lacks reasons for doubt with regard to the target proposition (e.g., Stroud 1984; Williams 1991).

Since the modal intuition plays a central role in many formulations of radical skepticism, anti-skeptics have good reason to take issue with it. To this end, they can pursue one of two paths. On the one hand, they can grant the modal intuition but provide independent arguments to revise it. Let us term this the ‘overriding strategy’. On the other hand, they can argue that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, this is not a genuine intuition but a contentious theoretical claim based on faulty reasoning. Let us term this the ‘undercutting strategy’.¹

I shall pursue the undercutting strategy. I will argue that, since the modal intuition is not universally shared, it should be rationally motivated. In addition, the only possible way of rationally motivating the modal intuition is by a priori reasoning. Given the central role played by skeptical scenarios in discussions on radical skepticism, it is plausible to reconstruct this a priori reasoning as a conceivability argument to the effect that one could be completely cut off from the external world. I will contend that this conceivability argument fails to establish the desired conclusion. Hence, we can use this result to undercut any radical skeptical paradox that relies on the conception of radical skeptical scenarios.

The project of this paper is not without precedents. Indeed, philosophers such as Albritton (2011), Clarke (1972), Kung (2011), and Levin (2000) have also criticized the modal intuition. Although their conclusions are broadly consistent with the main claims of this paper, they are also different in some crucial respects. These authors have insisted that the putative radical skeptical possibilities rest upon knowledge or justified beliefs about the external world. They have defended these conclusions by relying on a broad skepticism about knowledge of modality (Albritton 2011; Levin 2000), externalism about meaning (Albritton 2011) or a conception of philosophy as a pure inquiry that pursues a ‘detached’ or ‘objective’ understanding of the world

¹ The terminology is from Pritchard (2012, 2016). I come back to this distinction in Sect. 1.

(Clarke 1972; see also Stroud 1984 and Williams 1991). Interesting as these ideas are, none of them will play a role in the present paper. I will rather examine the attempt to conceive scenarios that verify radical skeptical hypotheses and show that these attempts fail to rationally motivate the modal intuition.²

In a series of insightful writings, Pritchard (2012, 2016) has sketched a rather different strategy. On his view, radical skeptical hypotheses are never rationally motivated. For this reason, I will start with a critical analysis of Pritchard's approach (Sects. 1, 2). In my view, Pritchard's proposal fails on two counts. First, it does not accommodate the uncontroversial fact that the layperson may be *reluctant* to believe that she *could* be in a radical skeptical scenario. At the very least, she may take it to be an *open question* whether she could be in a radical skeptical scenario. Thus, if the layperson is to understand what is going on in the radical skeptical paradox, she should be rationally convinced that the corresponding skeptical hypotheses could obtain. Second, Pritchard overlooks the possibility that radical skeptical hypotheses could be rationally motivated by a priori reasoning (Sect. 3).

In the remainder of the paper, I sketch a new undercutting strategy. To this end, I offer a reconstruction of a conceivability argument that may be used to rationally motivate the claim that radical skeptical hypotheses are possible. Although this is not the only possible route to rationally motivate radical skeptical hypotheses, it captures the way radical skepticism has been understood in much recent epistemology (Sect. 4). I then argue that the conceivability argument does not provide good reasons to think that radical skeptical hypotheses are possible (Sect. 5). I use the results of the discussion to sketch an undercutting strategy that can be applied to any formulation of radical skepticism that relies on the modal intuition (Sect. 6). I conclude with an answer to a potential objection (Sect. 7).

1 Undercutting versus overriding anti-skeptical strategies

It has become usual to distinguish two different ways of formulating radical skepticism. On one interpretation, radical skepticism is a skeptical *position*. Hence, there is a (merely possible or actual) skeptic who takes on a number of commitments such as 'You do not know whether you are a BIV'. It has been pointed out that it is very hard for the skeptic to hold a coherent position. Indeed, some philosophers have suggested that the radical skeptic cannot genuinely believe what she asserts (e.g., Greco 2012) or that her commitments presuppose a belief in the proposition they deny, so they are incoherent (e.g., Sosa 2011; Strawson 1985).

There is another interpretation of radical skepticism that cannot be dismissed in any of these ways. On this view, radical skepticism is a *paradox* that arises from a set of intuitions that strike us as individually true but collectively entail a contradiction (Byrne 2004; Pritchard 2012, 2014, 2016; Stroud 1984). As Pritchard nicely puts it: "The dispute with the 'skeptical' is in fact a quarrel that is completely

² In this respect, my project is closer to that of Kung (2011). Nevertheless, we rely on different conceptions of imagination, which result in different undercutting strategies. I compare my approach with Kung's in footnotes 15 and 17.

internal to our conceptual realm, and hence it is an argument with ourselves” (Pritchard 2016: 161).

Pritchard distinguishes two different strategies to solve the skeptical paradox: overriding and undercutting strategies. According to the overriding strategy, radical skepticism is a *bona fide* paradox, for “it arises out of our most fundamental epistemological commitments” (Pritchard 2016: 161). Given this interpretation, the anti-skeptic will seek to provide independent arguments to revise (some of) those pre-theoretical commitments in such a way that the contradiction is removed. The undercutting strategy, by contrast, denies that the skeptical paradox is a genuine paradox. Indeed, it claims that radical skepticism “smuggles contentious theoretical claims into the set-up of the skeptical argument, disguised as common sense” (Pritchard 2016: 172).³

As Pritchard rightly observes, there is some reason to prefer an undercutting to an overriding solution. If one offers an overriding solution, there is a sense in which one has *reaffirmed* the paradox. One has granted that, despite its intuitive character, a theoretical revision of our concepts is called for. Hence, “the philosophical pull of skepticism will continue even after we have adopted the relevant anti-skeptical stance” (Pritchard 2012: 133), leaving us with some intellectual uneasiness. This intellectual uneasiness will be appeased, however, if we manage to demonstrate that the paradox is not genuine at all. Thus, other things being equal, we should try to undercut radical skepticism rather than override it.

A good undercutting strategy should carry out two tasks. First, it should identify the dubious piece of reasoning underlying (some of) the putative intuitions that generate the contradiction. Second, it should deliver an account of how knowledge of everyday propositions is possible. In this paper, I focus on the first task. Although I am sympathetic to Pritchard’s contention that we should try to undercut radical skepticism, I think that he mischaracterizes the nature of radical skeptical hypotheses.

2 Merely raised versus rationally motivated hypotheses

Pritchard (2016) has sketched an undercutting strategy that combines epistemological disjunctivism and a Wittgensteinian account of hinge commitments in order to respond to two formulations of radical skepticism: one based on the closure principle and another based on the underdetermination principle. In this section, I present an aspect of his anti-skeptical strategy that is independent from epistemological disjunctivism and the theory of hinge commitments. This strategy exploits the distinction between merely raised and rationally motivated hypotheses. Pritchard’s use of this distinction can be articulated as a four-step argument.

³ For similar distinctions, see Cassam (2007), Schiffer (1996: 330), and Williams (1991). I am using ‘intuition’ as roughly equivalent to a pre-theoretical or commonsense commitment. The reader is invited to rephrase the distinction between the two strategies within her preferred account of intuitions.

- Step 1* There is an independently motivated distinction between two ways of introducing error-possibilities: *merely raised* and *rationally motivated error-possibilities*
- Step 2* Each way of introducing an error-possibility imposes different rational requirements on us. If an error-possibility is rationally motivated, the agent ought to rule it out by providing independent reasons that speak to the specific grounds offered in support of the relevant error-possibility. If an error-possibility is merely raised, our agent may ignore it
- Step 3* Radical skeptical error-possibilities are, *by their nature*, merely raised
- Step 4* Therefore, radical skeptical error-possibilities may be ignored

Let us examine this four-step argument.

Step 1 Consider a version of Dretske's (1970) zebra scenario:

The zebra in the Zoo

Suppose that Julia is in the zoo and sees a zebra in the zebra pen. Suppose further that Julia has normal vision, lacks expertise in zoology, and has performed no special checks on the animal. Many philosophers have the intuition that Julia is in a position to know that there is a zebra before her. Nevertheless, Julia's knowledge is consistent with her inability to discriminate the zebra from a cleverly disguised mule.

Suppose now that Julia becomes aware of the skeptical possibility that she is seeing a cleverly disguised mule. There are at least two ways in which this hypothesis could be introduced. One option would be to rationally motivate it. Carter and Pritchard (2016) provide the following characterization of rationally motivated error-possibilities:

(RME) Rationally Motivated Error-Possibilities

An agent, *S*, rationally motivates an error hypothesis *h* just in case *S* considers *h* because *h* is incompatible with the propositions *S* believes and *S* has rational support for *h* (Carter and Pritchard 2016: 982).

Julia's interlocutor could assert that he inspected the animal and noticed that its black stripes were painted on. Alternatively, he could point out that he heard from a good source that the only zebra in the zoo died the day before, so it was replaced with a painted mule.

This case would contrast with a merely raised error-possibility:

(MRE) Merely Raised Error-Possibilities

An agent, *S*, merely raises an error hypothesis *h* just in case *S* considers *h* because *h* is incompatible with the propositions *S* believes (Carter and Pritchard 2016: 982).

MRE are analogous to hypotheses formulated “on a whim” (Pritchard forthcoming: 5). Plausibly enough, a hypothesis formulated on a whim “does not suffice to introduce a defeater” (Pritchard 2016: 159).

Step 2 Each way of introducing an error-possibility imposes different rational requirements on us. If Julia’s interlocutor were to tell her that he had inspected the animal and noticed that its black stripes were painted on, one might expect Julia to perform a similar check on the animal. If her interlocutor invoked a good source, Julia ought to provide reasons to think that the source is not reliable. In any of these cases, Julia ought to furnish independent reasons that speak to the specific grounds offered in support of the error-possibility (Pritchard 2012: 124; Carter and Pritchard 2016: Sect. 3).

Consider now MRE. It seems wrong to expect Julia to provide independent reasons to defeat a hypothesis formulated on a whim. Hence, there is an epistemic asymmetry between RME and MRE. If Julia knows that there is a zebra before her, she can retain her perceptual knowledge even though she lacks independent rational support against the merely raised error-possibility.

Step 3 Radical skeptical error-possibilities are “by their nature bare—i.e., rationally unmotivated—error-possibilities” (Pritchard 2016: 140; see also 2012: 129, 149, 151). Pritchard defends this claim by means of two arguments.

The first argument is that radical skeptical error-possibilities cannot be *empirically* motivated without incoherence:

[T]he very idea of there being empirical grounds for thinking that we are the victims of a radical skeptical scenario is itself problematic. [...] Because it is in the very nature of radical skeptical hypotheses that they call one’s empirical beliefs into question *en masse*, it is therefore inevitable that they will call into question whatever empirical basis one takes oneself to have for supposing such a hypothesis to be true (Pritchard 2012: 126–7).

The second argument is that, if one tried to rationally motivate radical skeptical-error possibilities, one would be led to construe radical skepticism as a *position* and not as a *paradox*:

[A]ny form of radical skepticism that incorporates an appeal to empirical grounds in support of radical skeptical hypotheses would inevitably be drawn down the road of offering their skepticism as a position rather than a paradox. This is because it is in the very nature of radical skepticism *qua* paradox that it is meant to be simply extracting deep tensions within our own commitments, rather than being in the business of putting forward commitments of its own (Pritchard 2012: 128).

Step 4 If radical skeptical error-possibilities are merely raised, we are

spared the impossible task of trying to demonstrate that agents have an independent reflectively accessible rational basis for excluding radical skeptical hypotheses (Pritchard 2012: 151; see also Pritchard 2016: 140–1).

If our subject has a piece of perceptual knowledge, being unable to provide reasons that speak to the falsity of the target error-possibility will not lead her to lose it.

I accept Steps 1–2 but reject Step 3.

3 Two rejoinders to Step 3

Consider the second argument. Those who try to rationally motivate a radical skeptical error-possibility “would inevitably be drawn down the road of offering their skepticism as a position rather than a paradox”. Suppose one is interested in the formulation of radical skepticism as a paradox but also thinks that it is not a genuine paradox at all. In this case, one might undercut the putative paradox by criticizing the *rational motivations* invoked by philosophers in order to pass it off as a genuine paradox. Thus, it is not true that examining the rational motivations of radical skeptical error-possibilities would inevitably lead us to construe radical skepticism as a position. Instead, this could be part and parcel of an undercutting strategy (Sect. 1).

In his paper “Sceptical Intuitions”, Pritchard (2014: 215) concedes that, “[w]hile many philosophers would grant that intuition points to the truth of [the] proposition [that I am unable to know that I am not a BIV], it is certainly not a claim that one would expect to find a non-philosopher making”. Later on, he adds: “the premises of this ‘paradox’ will strike the philosophically uninitiated as obviously false” (221; see also Sosa 1999: 152 n 16). As a result, there is a mismatch between the way the layperson reacts to the skeptical error-possibility and the way the expert philosopher reacts to it. What explains this mismatch? Pritchard admits that, “with a certain degree of philosophical ingenuity one can get ordinary folk to realize that, on reflection, there is a paradox in play here” (2014: 220–1). He then describes this as a process whereby the expert philosopher can *convince* the uninitiated to form the corresponding intuitive judgments (2014: 222).

Pritchard’s second argument would go through if radical skepticism were a *bona fide* paradox. If it is not a *bona fide* paradox, however, it should be possible to identify the arguments that enabled the expert philosopher to convince the uninitiated that radical skepticism is a paradox. Recall now that many formulations of radical skepticism rely on this modal intuition: Even if you are in a paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge, you *could* be in a radical skeptical scenario. There are two common reactions to this putative intuition: (1) either it strikes the uninitiated as implausible or (2) they may be reluctant to believe that the radical skeptical hypothesis is a *genuine* possibility. Hence, proponents of the radical skeptical paradox should offer an argument in favor of the modal intuition, i.e., an argument that explains why, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, one *could* be completely cut off from the world.

According to Pritchard, merely raised error-possibilities are analogous to hypotheses formulated ‘on a whim’ (Sect. 2). Unfortunately, this account predicts that we cannot do anything to convince the uninitiated that the radical skeptical error-possibility *is* a possibility. According to the present view, however, there is

something we can do: provide her with reasons to believe that the radical skeptical hypothesis *could* obtain.

What about the first argument? Pritchard is certainly right to hold that one cannot rationally motivate radical skeptical error-possibilities by empirical means. Nevertheless, this remark would only support Pritchard's cause if we were prepared to endorse the empiricist claim that experience is our only source of reasons. Unfortunately, Pritchard has provided no argument for the truth of empiricism. Indeed, it is open for the proponent of the radical skeptical paradox to join so-called 'modal rationalists' (e.g., Bealer 2002; Chalmers 2002), and rationally motivate radical skeptical error-possibilities by a priori reasoning. In my view, this interpretation enables us to make sense of much contemporary work on radical skepticism.⁴

When philosophers introduce the radical skeptical problem, they often start by *conceiving* a radical skeptical scenario. To this end, they identify—by introspection—some features of what they take to be our epistemic situation when we are in paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge. Subsequently, they remove other features that, while being part of our epistemic situation when we are in paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge, would undermine the possession of knowledge of everyday propositions. Those philosophers will typically insist that, in radical skeptical scenarios, our perceptual experiences are indiscriminable from the experiences we would have if we were perceptually related to the world. Yet, we are disconnected from the world.

The upshot of this discussion is that we lack good reasons to think that radical skeptical hypotheses are, *by their nature*, merely raised. Hence, Pritchard's undercutting strategy fails. If there is an a priori route to rationally motivate radical skeptical error-possibilities, we are not spared the task of providing independent reasons that speak to the specific a priori grounds one could offer in support of the radical skeptical error-possibility.

4 An a priori route to radical skepticism

The claim that a hypothesis *h* is rationally motivated can be understood as implying that there are *conclusive* reasons that favor *h*. Alternatively, it can just mean that there are *prima facie* reasons that favor *h*, i.e., reasons that can be defeated by new evidence or further reasoning (e.g., Pollock and Cruz 1999). My main claim is that radical skeptical error-possibilities can only be *prima facie* rationally motivated. Indeed, I hold that radical skeptical error-possibilities are based on faulty a priori reasoning.

⁴ Pritchard (2012: 131–ff., 2014: 221–ff.) concedes that, by engaging in philosophical *reflection* on our epistemic practices, the putative skeptical paradox can be shown to rest upon intuitive propositions. Nevertheless, he seems to restrict the use of reflection to motivate the underdetermination and the closure principles and not the skeptical hypotheses themselves. Unfortunately, Pritchard does not defend this restriction.

If we take seriously the considerations from Sect. 3, we can try to identify a rational motivation for the claim that radical skeptical hypotheses could obtain. Here is my suggestion. We can reconstruct the radical skeptical hypothesis as the conclusion of a conceivability argument. This argument starts from a specific conception of our current perceptual experiences and concludes that it is still possible—in a sense I will specify below—that some properties of our current perceptual experiences are instantiated but we are cut off from the world.

(CA) *The Conceivability Argument for Radical Skeptical Hypotheses*

(CA1) If I can adequately conceive that p , it is possible that p

(CA2) Suppose that I am in a paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge: I have an experience as of a banana before me, the illumination conditions are normal, my visual system is in good order, I have ingested no drugs, and so on. Even in this case, I can adequately conceive that I have this perceptual experience but am completely cut off from the world

(CA3) Therefore, it is possible that I have this perceptual experience but am completely cut off from the world

A caveat is in order. I do not mean to imply that CA is the *only* way of rationally motivating radical skeptical error-possibilities. My claim is weaker: CA offers a rational motivation that skews Pritchard's undercutting strategy. Indeed, it constitutes a potential counterexample to his claim that "radical skeptical error-possibilities are never epistemically motivated" (Pritchard 2012: 126). Thus, the anti-skeptic ought to provide independent reasons against CA. There might be other ways of justifying radical skeptical hypotheses that do not require the use of conceivability arguments. Still, I am not aware of any better alternative. And, even if there is a better alternative, CA offers a plausible reconstruction of the way radical skeptical hypotheses have often been introduced in discussions about radical skepticism.⁵

In what follows, I clarify the key concepts of CA: *possibility* and *adequate conception*.

4.1 Possibility

Although the claim that radical skeptical hypotheses are possible plays a prominent role in epistemology, it is not always crystal clear what sort of possibility is relevant to these discussions. In this section, I present some arguments that favor an interpretation of possibility as metaphysical. Although these arguments do not demonstrate that skeptical hypotheses *must* be metaphysically possible, they support

⁵ I do not mean to imply that *any* use of conceivability offers an a priori route to rationally motivate modal claims. My claim is rather that conceivability is the natural strategy to rationally motivate radical skeptical hypotheses without introducing empirical grounds. At this stage of my argument, it is an open question whether CA offers an a priori route to rationally motivate radical skeptical hypotheses. I comment upon two other sources of modal knowledge in footnote 19.

the claim that construing them as metaphysically possible is *sufficient* to capture the way radical skeptical hypotheses are introduced in epistemology.⁶

Let us say that a hypothesis *h* is *epistemically possible* if and only if *h* is consistent with what the agent knows. This construal would face the following problem. Suppose that you know that there is a banana before you. Proponents of the radical skeptical paradox typically assume that radical skeptical hypotheses are not obviously inconsistent with your possession of this piece of knowledge. If radical skeptical hypotheses were epistemically possible, however, we would be unable to raise them in the first place (Beebe 2010: 463).

Let us say that a hypothesis *h* is *physically possible* if and only if *h* is consistent with the laws of nature of the actual world. Intuitively, our knowledge of the laws of nature is empirical. Yet, empirical knowledge is not available in the context of a discussion on radical skepticism (Sect. 2). Therefore, it would be ill advised to argue for the physical possibility of radical skeptical hypotheses via conceivability arguments.

One might think that the relevant possibility is *logical*.⁷ Let us say that a hypothesis *h* is *logically possible* if and only if *h* is not a contradiction or does not entail a contradiction. Unfortunately, this characterization does not capture the way radical skeptical hypotheses have been understood in recent epistemology. As Burgess (2008: 230) observes, logical possibility does not admit of degrees. A hypothesis cannot be a *little bit* contradictory. Logical possibility is a binary property: either a hypothesis is logically coherent or not (Saint-Germier 2015: 182). Error-possibilities, by contrast, admit of degrees. That is why we can consider radical skeptical error-possibilities as farther away from the actual world than garden-variety error-possibilities. Crucially, this ordering relation is taken for granted in most contemporary analyses of knowledge (Kung 2011: 390). Consider safety-based accounts. Roughly, if one knows that *p*, one could not have falsely believed *p* in (most) nearby possible worlds. Since radical skeptical worlds are not close enough to the actual world, proponents of safety-based analyses think that knowledge of everyday propositions is compatible with far-off radical skeptical possibilities (e.g., Pritchard 2005; Sosa 1999). Hence, radical skeptical error-possibilities are not merely logically possible. Their modal status ought to admit of degrees.

If radical skeptical error-possibilities are neither epistemic, nor physical, nor merely logical, what could they be? My suggestion is that they are metaphysical

⁶ Defenders of the metaphysical reading include BonJour (2002), Graham (2007), Levin (2000), Kung (2011), Markie (1986), and Pryor (2000). Beebe (2010) argues that a skeptical hypothesis does not need to be metaphysically possible in order to be epistemically significant. His argument is based on an example from theism. If there is a God, the hypothesis that there is no God is necessarily false. Yet, one might use this hypothesis to formulate a skeptical argument against theism. Although I accept the counterexample, I do not think it undermines the present approach. All I need is the claim that the metaphysical possibility of *some* skeptical hypotheses is—maybe conjoined with other conditions—*sufficient* to make them epistemically significant.

⁷ Neta (2004: 300) writes: “[I]t is logically possible for our perceptual experiences to occur just as they do occur whether we are hallucinating or enjoying veridical perception”. Albritton (2011) rejects this logical approach.

because, contrary to merely logical possibilities, metaphysical possibilities admit of degrees. To borrow an example from Burgess: some miraculous possibilities have been taken to be metaphysically possible. Yet, if those are cases in which some laws of nature have exceptions, they are not physical possibilities. In addition, it makes sense to consider miraculous possibilities as farther away from non-miraculous possibilities.

There is also a positive reason to understand radical skeptical hypotheses as metaphysically possible. If radical skeptical hypotheses are metaphysically possible, there are two genuine alternatives about how the world is: the external world hypothesis and the radical skeptical hypothesis. Both are ways the world could be, period. As Kung (2011: 389) rightly points out, this is a stronger reason for concern than just the claim: ‘For all I know, I could be a BIV’.

Although I will not try to offer an analysis of metaphysical possibility, a rough indication will suffice. Let us say that a hypothesis h is metaphysically possible if and only if h is compatible with the nature of things. On this reading, CA purports to rationally motivate the claim that the nature of our current perceptual experience is compatible with our being disconnected from the world.⁸

4.2 Adequate conception

The philosophical notion of conception has no single, well-defined counterpart in ordinary language (Gendler and Hawthorne 2002). Thus, we should offer a characterization that fits its theoretical role. Let us say that a conception is a mental representation that seeks to offer rational support for a modal claim. I propose to follow Yablo (1993: 4) and say that, if a hypothesis h is *adequately* conceived, h is presented as possible. If h is presented as possible, one is in a mental state that

- (i) is veridical only if possibly p , and (ii) moves [one] to believe that p is possible (Yablo 1993: 7).

Recall now that the layperson may be undecided as to whether radical skeptical hypotheses are metaphysically possible (Sect. 3). Thus, one may prompt them to conceive a skeptical scenario that presents the corresponding hypothesis h as possible and, as a result, moves them to believe that h is possible. Let us say that a scenario is (a part of) a possible world. We can construe (parts of) possible worlds either as complexes of objects, events, and properties or as descriptions of objects, events, and properties. The details will not matter here. If a scenario s verifies a radical skeptical hypothesis h then, if s were actual, h would be true (Yablo 1993: 27; see also Chalmers 2006: 77). The idea is that the adequate conception can present a hypothesis h as possible if and only if the subject has managed to construct

⁸ This reading also fits the line of argument that motivates the so-called ‘highest common factor’ picture of experience (e.g., McDowell 1995). For reasons of space, I cannot examine the relations between CA and the highest common factor picture. All I can say is that my criticism of CA does not directly establish any claim on the nature of perceptual experience. Instead, it establishes the weaker claim that we lack good reasons to think that radical skeptical hypotheses are possible. See Sect. 6.

a mental representation of a scenario s that verifies h and the subject realizes that the verification relation holds between s and h .

Our next question is to determine the means of conceiving scenarios. A natural place to look is the theory of imagination. There is an influential view according to which imagination is a recreative mental state (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002: 41). On this approach, a state of imagining creates a ‘facsimile’ of other mental states, often called their counterparts (Goldman 2006: 42). Thus, there are as many different kinds of imagination as there are mental states one can recreate. We can distinguish two main families of imagination: perception-like imagination and belief-like imagination. In the former, one imagines, in a perception-like way, a scenario that verifies the corresponding hypothesis. In the latter, one imagines, in a belief-like way, a scenario that verifies the corresponding hypothesis.

Let us combine this two-fold distinction with Yablo’s proposal. We can say that there are two main strategies to represent scenarios that verify radical skeptical hypotheses. One of them recreates scenarios in a perception-like way; the other recreates them in a belief-like way. Thus, one can generate the appearance that radical skeptical hypotheses are possible by engaging in either perception-like imagination or belief-like imagination (or a combination of both).

There are two broadly different strategies to block conceivability arguments. First, one could endorse some form of modal skepticism. One could either deny that we have (interesting) knowledge of modal facts (e.g., Van Inwagen 1998) or submit that conceivability is not a reliable guide to possibility (e.g., Byrne 2007; Levin 2000).⁹ Second, one could just claim, on a case-by-case basis, that we cannot adequately conceive a scenario that verifies the relevant hypothesis. Following Chalmers (2002), there are at least three ways in which one’s conception can reveal itself as inadequate:

- (INC) *Incompleteness*: We are unable to fill in crucial details of the scenario
- (DC) *Deep Contradictions*: When we reflect on the scenario, we discover *deep contradictions* that were not apparent at first sight
- (MIS) *Misconception*: The scenarios we can coherently imagine do not verify any radical skeptical hypothesis. Instead, they verify another hypothesis in the vicinity

The following methodological maxim seems plausible: Other things being equal, one’s solution to the problem of radical skepticism should not involve the rejection of principles that enjoy widespread acceptance in philosophy. Given that conceivability arguments play a central role in other areas of philosophy, I will explore the second strategy.

My main claim is that we cannot adequately conceive radical skeptical scenarios. In other words, I reject premise CA2. When one is in a paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge, one cannot adequately conceive that one has this perceptual

⁹ Albritton (2011: 22) seems to be attracted by some form of modal skepticism: “Some such things, and not others, are no doubt possible, if only one knew it. But which ones? Not ‘which ones are not merely possible but actual?’ Just ‘which ones are so much as *possible*?’ We don’t know, that’s all. By hypothesis we don’t. And neither do skeptics”.

experience but is completely cut off from the world. Any attempt at recreating radical skeptical scenarios in imagination is prey to one of Chalmers' pitfalls.

5 Conceiving radical skeptical scenarios

In this section, I defend three claims:

No Adequate Perception-Like Imagination: We cannot adequately imagine, in a perception-like way, this perceptual experience as an experience with no world (Sect. 5.1).

No Adequate Belief-Like Imagination: We cannot adequately imagine, in a belief-like way, this perceptual experience as an experience with no world (Sect. 5.2).

Misconception: The scenarios we can adequately imagine do not verify any radical skeptical hypothesis. Instead, they verify another hypothesis in the vicinity (Sect. 5.3).

5.1 Perception-like imagination

Suppose that you are in a paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge: you have an experience as of a banana before you, the illumination conditions are normal, your visual system is in good order, you have ingested no drugs, and so on. Could you visualize this visual experience as an experience with no world? Could you perceptually imagine that, right now, you are a BIV? I am afraid that you cannot do that. My first claim is that you cannot perceptually recreate your current visual experience being as it is but with no world (this claim can be generalized to other sensory modalities).

Reflect on the situation. You have a visual experience as of a banana before you. Now you have to perceptually imagine your visual experience as of a banana before you as the experience you would have if you were a BIV. In other words, you have to take up your current perceptual perspective on the banana but imagine that there is nothing out there. Try it. I am confident that you cannot do that. If you are currently having an experience as of a banana before you, you won't be able to imagine *this* experience as of a banana as nothing but the experience of a BIV.

Let us concede that you might be tricked in this specific case and there is no *real* banana. There is just a fake banana. Even in this case, your experience will seem to be related to an external layout. The problem of imagining a radical skeptical scenario in a perception-like way is the problem of imagining that that external layout is not really there. As far as this perceptual experience is concerned, I cannot perceptually imagine that the external layout that seems to be presented is not really there. I am pretty sure that this holds for you as well.

The present result follows from two basic facts: the structure of perceptual experience and the structure of perception-like imagination.

Consider the structure of perceptual experience. It has often been pointed out that, when we reflect on the phenomenal character of perceptual experience, our reflection reveals mind-independent objects and their properties (Moore 1903; Harman 1990).¹⁰ Now consider the structure of perception-like imagination. When we imagine a perceptual experience, the *counterpart* of our imagining is a mental episode that is directed at mind-independent objects and properties.¹¹ Hence, the imagined experience seems to be related to mind-independent objects and properties *even in the context of the imagining*. In order to perceptually recreate the experiences of a BIV, however, we have to do something else: recreate a mental episode that is not related to any mind-independent objects and properties. But we cannot do that. Our imagining is, so to speak, ‘indexed’ to transparent perceptual experiences.

This is not to deny the obvious fact that imagination can vary the intentional objects of perceptual experiences. You can certainly imagine a green cube and then modify various properties thereof: its shape, its size or its color. Nevertheless, these variations have some limits. Although you can modify the properties of the *intentional object* of your recreated mental episode, you cannot modify the structural properties of that mental counterpart. Thus, the limits of perceptual imagination are partly determined by the limits of its mental counterpart (Balcerak-Jackson forthcoming: 18–9). The attempt at imagining, in a perception-like way, that one enjoys this perceptual experience without a world violates the structural property of transparency.

Let us summarize the results so far in terms of Chalmers’ pitfalls. Since we cannot perceptually recreate our current perceptual experiences as the experiences of a BIV, our imaginative project cannot be completed (INC). If we insist that our incomplete imagining is sufficient to depict the experiences had by a BIV, we are led to a contradiction. After all, if our perception-like imagination is indexed to transparent perceptual experiences, we cannot perceptually imagine—in the same act of imagining, anyway—that our current perceptual experiences have the phenomenal character they seem to have and that there are no mind-independent objects and properties (DC).

5.2 Belief-like imagination

From the fact that you cannot perceptually recreate your current perceptual experiences as the experiences you would have in a radical skeptical scenario, it does not follow that you cannot adequately imagine radical skeptical scenarios *tout court*. The proponent of the radical skeptical hypothesis might grant that your current perceptual experiences are transparent. Still, it does not follow that the intentional objects and properties of your current perceptual experiences are ‘real’,

¹⁰ There is also a stronger interpretation of transparency, which also holds that introspection does not reveal non-presentational features of perceptual experiences. I do not need to endorse this stronger interpretation in the present context.

¹¹ “‘To what is the subject attending during acts of imagining?’ gets the answer ‘To those things, whatever they are, that figure in the content of the mental states being recreated’” (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002: 42).

‘external’ or ‘mind-independent’. Indeed, a powerful computer or an evil demon could be the cause of those intentional objects and properties.¹²

This line of reply is not without merit. Nevertheless, it does not undermine the claim of the previous section. The claim was that we are unable to imagine, *in a perception-like way*, a radical skeptical scenario. Unfortunately, the objector has introduced an element that goes beyond what perception-like imagination can deliver: a claim about the *etiology* of one’s current perceptual experiences. Furthermore, when our opponent introduces etiological considerations, she is relying on an undefended modal claim: that a powerful computer or an evil demon *could* be the cause of those intentional objects and properties.

Maybe the argument could be rephrased as follows: you can adequately conceive scenarios in which a powerful computer or an evil demon is the cause of the intentional objects and properties of this perceptual experience you are having right now. Clearly, this conception cannot rely on the sole resources of perception-like imagination. Instead, it seems to recruit representational resources closer to those involved in belief. You might try to overcome the limitations of perception-like imagination by recreating some belief-like states that represent the causes of your current perceptual experiences. To my mind, this is what most philosophers do when they introduce BIV-scenarios. Here is Chalmers:

A connection is arranged so that whenever this body receives sensory inputs inside the simulation, the envatted cognitive system will receive sensory inputs of the same sort (Chalmers 2005: 133).

He pursues a similar strategy in his characterization of the evil demon hypothesis:

I have a disembodied mind, and an evil genius is feeding me sensory input to give the appearance of an external world (Chalmers 2005: 157).

In what follows, I argue that any use of belief-like imagination to recreate radical skeptical scenarios leads to a dilemma: (1) either one leaves the scenarios heavily underspecified, in which case they do not rationally support the claim that the corresponding skeptical hypotheses are possible (INC); (2) or one tries to specify those scenarios, but then is led to contradict a well-entrenched intuition concerning the relation between the first- and the third-person perspectives (DC).

Given your inability to perceptually imagine your current perceptual experiences as the experiences of an envatted being, you could recreate some belief-like representations about their *causes*. In doing so, you are led to occupy a *double* perspective. On the one hand, you take up the perspective of the subject of the experiences (i.e., the first-person perspective). On the other, you take up the perspective of an external observer who considers the causes of her experiences (i.e., the third-person perspective).

¹² It is not easy to provide an uncontroversial paraphrase of the adjectives ‘real’, ‘external’ or ‘mind-independent’. For my present purposes, these adjectives can be understood as theoretical placeholders for whatever status the intentional objects of our experiences enjoy when they are proper parts of a non-skeptical scenario.

Suppose now that you decide to not provide further details. You deem it sufficient to hold that you *lack* reasons to rule out the hypothesis that entities other than worldly objects and properties could produce the phenomenal character of your current perceptual experiences.¹³ Unfortunately, this move would be unsatisfactory. Suppose that you are undecided as to whether radical skeptical hypotheses are possible (Sect. 3). As a result, invoking your lack of reasons to rule out the hypothesis that entities other than worldly objects and properties could produce the phenomenal character of your current perceptual experiences would not suffice to move you to believe that you could be a BIV. What is missing? You failed to generate an appearance of possibility (Sect. 4.2). As Yablo nicely puts it,

you do not acquire justification for *believing* that something is possible simply through lack of justification for *denying* that it is. Otherwise, there could be no such thing as a person completely in the dark about *p*'s modal status; the less she knew *against p*'s possibility, the better her grounds would be for concluding that it *was* possible (Yablo 1993: 20; see also 8).

If the layperson is in the dark about the modal status of the radical skeptical hypothesis—a reasonable assumption to make—we will not enlighten them just by pointing out that they lack reasons to rule out the radical skeptical hypothesis.

Another option would be to try to fill in the details of the radical skeptical scenario. To this end, you should be in a position to establish—in imagination—systematic correlations between the perceptual experiences you are currently enjoying and the causes of those experiences. In other words, you should be able to establish *specific* correlations of the following sort:

Systematic First-Person/Third-Person Correlations

Other things being equal, if inputs of type A were given, experiences of type B would be produced.

In order to fill in the details of the radical skeptical scenario, these systematic correlations should be different in kind from the first-person/third-person correlations that arguably produce experiences in the non-skeptical case. In other words, you should be able to substantiate the hypothesis that the types of causes available in the radical skeptical scenario could produce the very same types of experiences that are produced by the types of causes available in the non-skeptical scenario. But you cannot rely on empirical information in order to establish these systematic first-person/third-person correlations (Sect. 2). Thus, you should establish them by a priori means. Unfortunately, this would lead you to violate one of our strongest intuitions on the nature of experience. This intuition says that systematic first-person/third-person correlations cannot be determined solely by a priori means.

Let us illustrate this intuition by means of the thought experiment that underlies Jackson's (1982) famous knowledge argument. Mary, a brilliant scientist, learned all the physical truths of the world from within a black and white room. One day she

¹³ This roughly corresponds to Chalmers' (2002) concept of negative conception and Yablo's (1993) concept of undecidability.

is released from her room and sees a red tomato for the first time. “Will she learn anything or not?”—Jackson (1982: 130) asks. His answer is ‘yes’. Although Mary knows the conjunction of all physical truths about the world, she will learn something new when she is allowed to have color experience. This thought experiment is based on the intuition that Mary cannot know a priori that such and such types of physical configurations produce such and such types of experiences.

It is not entirely clear whether Jackson’s knowledge argument establishes the falsity of physicalism. Still, even its critics are prepared to grant the intuition mentioned above: there is no way for Mary to know a priori that such and such types of physical configurations (accessible only from the third-person perspective) produce such and such types of experiences (accessible only from the first-person perspective). Consider some influential replies. Some have contended that Mary only acquires a new way of representing facts she already knew (e.g., Lycan 1996), thus the argument does not refute physicalism. This view clearly preserves the above intuition: if Mary comes to represent the color of the tomato in a new way, she cannot know a priori that such and such types of physical configurations produce such and such types of experiences (understood as new ways of representing these physical configurations). Others have argued that Mary does not gain propositional knowledge but only new abilities (e.g., Nemirov 1990) or acquaintance knowledge (e.g., Bigelow and Pargetter 1990). This diagnosis also preserves the previous intuition. If different types of knowledge are involved before and after the tomato experience, Mary cannot know a priori that such and such types of physical configurations (known in a propositional manner) produce such and such types of experiences (known in a non-propositional manner).¹⁴

If you want to fill in the details of the radical skeptical scenario, your situation is the mirror image of Mary’s. You have first-person access to the phenomenal character of your current perceptual experiences via introspection but lack any access to their physical causes. (If you had the latter, you would have empirical knowledge or beliefs.) Your task is to recreate systematic correlations between these perceptual experiences you are enjoying from the first-person perspective and causes that you can only postulate from the third-person perspective. The trouble here is that you should be in a position to establish these correlations by relying only on your introspective access to the phenomenal character of your current perceptual experiences. Unfortunately, if you try to recreate these correlations by a priori means, you will be led to contradict the widespread intuition that there is an epistemic gap between the first- and the third-person perspectives and that this gap cannot be bridged a priori. As Mary’s story illustrates, this epistemic gap may be cashed out in different ways: one may hold that the first- and the third-person perspectives give you access to different properties, that they involve different modes of representing the same properties or that they recruit different kinds of

¹⁴ Jackson (1998) holds that one can deduce all psychological truths—including those concerning the phenomenal character of our experiences—from the conjunction of all physical truths. Unfortunately, this view presupposes the possession of empirical knowledge of physical truths, which is not available in the context of radical skepticism (Sect. 2).

knowledge. Whatever view you choose, there is an epistemic gap between the two perspectives and you cannot bridge that gap solely by a priori means.

Let us summarize the upshot of the discussion in terms of Chalmers' pitfalls. If the correlations between experiences and their causes are left underspecified (INC), your conception does not generate an appearance of possibility. If you try to fill in the details of the missing correlations, you are led to assume that these correlations are available a priori. But this contradicts a deep-seated intuition about the gap between the first- and the third-person perspectives (DC).¹⁵

5.3 Misconception

In his seminal paper "The Legacy of Skepticism", Thompson Clarke considers an alternative hypothesis that is not ruled out by our previous arguments:

All this now might turn out to be a dream: I might wake up later in different surroundings, remembering what had really happened in the past, and *discover* I had just been dreaming (Clarke 1972: 764).

As Stroud (1984: 266) rightly points out: "That certainly is a thought I can have. It does seem to represent something that could happen; I can scarcely deny that it is possible".

I agree with Stroud that we can adequately conceive scenarios that verify Clarke's hypothesis. Nevertheless, I agree with Clarke that this hypothesis is not genuinely skeptical. If you think otherwise, you are falling prey to Chalmers' third pitfall:

(MIS) *Misconception:* The scenarios we can adequately imagine do not verify any radical skeptical hypothesis. Instead, they verify another hypothesis in the vicinity

We are interested in scenarios that verify hypotheses such as 'I could be dreaming' or 'I could be a BIV'. These hypotheses have the form $\Diamond\phi$. Clarke's

¹⁵ Albritton (2011) suggests that the question 'Is it possible or not?' only makes sense against a background of things known. Thus, radical skeptical possibilities cannot be raised in the first place (see also Levin 2000). Similarly, Kung (2011) argues that our justification to consider radical skeptical scenarios as metaphysically possible rests upon justified beliefs about the external world. My strategy is different. I claim that we cannot perceptually recreate our current perceptual experiences as the experiences of a BIV and that we cannot fill in the details of radical skeptical scenarios by a priori means. Whereas Albritton reaches this conclusion by examining various hypotheses that strike us as 'silly' or 'nonsense', my arguments exploit some structural features of experiences that prevent us from adequately conceiving radical skeptical hypotheses. Whereas Kung thinks that non-sensory imagination proceeds by stipulation, I emphasize that belief-like imagination cannot bridge the gap between the first- and the third-person perspectives.

Neta (2004) uses the (related) explanatory gap in order to criticize abductivist solutions to radical skepticism. On his view, if perceptual experiences are conceived subjectively, there will be an unbridgeable explanatory gap between those experiences and the external world conceived objectively. I did not exploit the gap between the first- and the third-person perspectives in order to criticize an anti-skeptical strategy but to block an a priori rational motivation of radical skeptical hypotheses. In addition, the argument does not rely on the claim that the gap is unbridgeable if one conceives of experiences subjectively but on the weaker principle that it cannot be bridged a priori.

hypothesis is different. We can paraphrase it as follows: ‘I could be in a situation in which, at some future time, I discover that I was dreaming’. Let us use ‘F’ to represent ‘it will at some time be the case that’ and ‘K’ to represent the knowledge I acquire when I wake up (the discovery). Thus, Clarke’s scenario verifies a hypothesis of the following form: $\Diamond F(K\phi)$. Unfortunately, this is not a radical skeptical hypothesis.

Radical skeptical scenarios were characterized as cases in which you would be completely cut off from the external world and know nothing or very little about it. A scenario in which you can make empirical discoveries does not fit this description. As Michael Williams puts it:

The fact of perceptual error suggests only that observational beliefs may have to be corrected in the light of further knowledge about the world. It does not, by itself, so much as hint at a radical estrangement from external reality (Williams 1991: 202–3; see also Stroud 1984: 140–1).

If you can wake up and realize that you had just been dreaming, you are not completely cut off from the external world. This is a scenario in which you can correct your beliefs in light of further knowledge.

As Stroud (1984) and Williams (1991) have stressed, radical skeptical hypotheses owe much of their force to the fact that they are formulated in paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge. Once the experience and evidence available in those paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge is fixed, it is still consistent with the nature of experience that one could be dreaming, deceived by an evil demon or a BIV. Clarke’s hypothesis violates this condition. Instead of keeping constant the experience and evidence available to us in paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge, it enriches it with *future* evidence. Thus, the only way in which this hypothesis could have any epistemological import would be to rely on *further assumptions* that bring this evidence to bear on our current epistemic situation. The underlying thought seems to be this: If I were to wake up in a few minutes and discover that I had been dreaming, this discovery would defeat my current justification to believe some everyday propositions. The problem is this: a scenario that involves the future acquisition of defeating evidence is not a scenario in which my *current* justification to believe some everyday propositions is *already* defeated. If you think otherwise, you may be relying on a principle along the following lines:

(PFDE) *The Principle of Future Defeating Evidence*

If it is possible that, at time t_{n+1} , I acquire evidence that defeats my current justification to believe that p , then I ought not to believe that p at time t_n .

If it is possible that I will wake up later and discover that I had just been dreaming, then I ought not to believe that I am not dreaming now. Recall now that skepticism is a putative skeptical paradox. Thus, we should be able to motivate each proposition by relying on principles that we pre-theoretically accept. Unfortunately, PFDE contradicts our epistemic practices. Scientific theories are certainly open to future disconfirmation. Nevertheless, if scientists do not *currently* have defeating reasons, it is rational for them to hold firm on their theories. It would be silly for

them to reject their theories just because they could acquire defeating reasons. The same holds in the context of radical skeptical hypotheses.

This example illustrates one of the main strategies we can use to undercut conceivability arguments for radical skeptical hypotheses. We can adequately conceive scenarios involving dreams and perceptual error. Nevertheless, this is not sufficient to make them radical skeptical scenarios. If one thinks otherwise, one may be tacitly relying on some dubious and unargued epistemological principles.¹⁶

6 Radical skepticism revisited

Whereas the layperson may be undecided as to the possibility of radical skeptical hypotheses, many philosophers find them intuitive. I have suggested that this mismatch could be explained if we interpret the latter as supporting their intuition on the basis of a conceivability argument. This raises a question: Why are those philosophers convinced that one could be in a radical skeptical scenario if they cannot adequately conceive it?

My answer is that epistemologists are not always sufficiently rigorous in their use of conceivability arguments. Some may be impressed by the fact that they can *entertain* radical skeptical hypotheses or *suppose* them to be true. Unfortunately, neither entertaining that p , nor supposing that p is evidence of the truth of p .¹⁷ Alternatively, they may have conflated two different things: the *absence* of an appearance of impossibility and the *presence* of an appearance of possibility. The former is not a good reason to believe that a given proposition is possible. Finally, those who find radical skeptical hypotheses intuitive may have judged that they could conceive a scenario that verifies those hypotheses without actually engaging in the exercise of constructing the scenario in imagination.¹⁸

If we cannot adequately conceive scenarios that verify radical skeptical hypotheses, we are in a position to improve upon Pritchard's anti-skeptical response. Suppose that I take myself to know that there is a banana before me. Hence, I could dismiss the BIV hypothesis as follows:

(NU) *New Undercutting Solution*

(NU1) I am aware of the error-possibility that I am a BIV

¹⁶ The conclusion of this sub-section is broadly consistent with Clarke's (1972) seminal analysis. Still, it differs from Clarke's approach in a crucial respect. Clarke's starting point is a set of meta-philosophical claims on the nature of philosophy as a pure inquiry that seeks to provide a detached understanding of the world. Clarke thinks that, although skeptical questions are genuinely philosophical, the skeptic has not managed to put forward genuinely *philosophical-skeptical* hypotheses. Her hypotheses are "impounded within the plain". They are not completely detached. If my analysis is correct, it shows that we can reach a similar conclusion without relying on overarching meta-philosophical claims on the nature of philosophy.

¹⁷ Kung (2011: 393) makes this point in a different context. In his classical treatment of Cartesian skepticism, Stroud (1984: 268-71) insists that radical skeptical scenarios can be coherently imagined. Still, he treats imagining that p as synonymous with supposing that p and entertaining that p .

¹⁸ This corresponds to Sorensen's (2006) concept of meta-conceivability.

- (NU2) Now I realize that I cannot adequately conceive a scenario that verifies the proposition that I am a BIV
- (NU3) Therefore, I lack a good reason to take that error-possibility seriously

To be sure, from the fact that I cannot adequately conceive a scenario that verifies a hypothesis *h* it does not follow that it is impossible that *h* obtains. After all, one's inability to conceive the relevant scenario could reflect one's psychological limitations. Therefore, my claim is not that radical skeptical scenarios are impossible. My claim is rather that we *lack* a good reason to take radical skeptical error-possibilities seriously: we cannot rationally motivate them via imagination.¹⁹

7 An objection

It might be objected that the preceding arguments simply reveal our cognitive limitations, so they lack any epistemic import. After all, one could rephrase CA by invoking the concept of ideal conceivability, i.e., conceivability by ideal beings (Chalmers 2002). Thus, although limited beings like us cannot ascertain the possibility of radical skeptical scenarios via imagination, ideal beings could do so.

There are at least two problems with this suggestion. First, idealizations are plausible only when they suppress some of our *contingent* limits, such as memory or attention span (Saint-Germier 2015: 313). Unfortunately, there are good reasons to think that the limits of imagination invoked here are not contingent but structural. We cannot perceptually imagine a radical skeptical scenario because transparency is a structural property of perceptual experiences. Moreover, the epistemic gap between the first- and the third-person perspectives seems to be a structural feature of our knowledge of ourselves in relation to the physical world. It is this gap that prevents us from imagining, in a belief-like way, a scenario that verifies the radical skeptical hypothesis.

Second, radical skepticism is supposed to be a paradox (Sect. 1). Since paradoxes rely on intuitions, the propositions used to formulate them ought to strike us as individually true. It was pointed out that we lack clear intuitions concerning the possibility of radical skeptical hypotheses (Sect. 3). If the only way in which we can rationally motivate them is to introduce idealized beings, there is a sense in which we are not faced with a *bona fide* paradox. After all, the possibility of radical

¹⁹ Some philosophers think that we have access to possibility by other means, such as intuition (Bealer 2002) or counterfactual reasoning (Williamson 2007). I think that these views cannot be adapted to provide a better rational motivation of radical skeptical hypotheses. Bealer (2002: 73-ff.) construes intuition as a *sui generis* propositional attitude of 'seeming'. Thus, if you have the intuition that *p*, it seems to you that *p*. Bealer's view raises a problem, though. Many of us were undecided as to whether radical skeptical hypotheses were genuinely possible and eventually changed our minds on this issue. It is unclear how Bealer could account for this change of mind without relying on the construction of skeptical scenarios in imagination. Williamson (2007) holds that counterfactual reasoning can provide armchair knowledge of modality. Still, he construes armchair knowledge broadly, as involving empirical knowledge. Thus, his approach is not available to rationally motivate radical skeptical hypotheses (Sect. 2).

skeptical hypotheses does not generate a tension within *our* conceptual system but within the conceptual system of *other* idealized creatures.

8 Conclusion

Pritchard has tried to undercut radical skepticism by introducing a distinction between merely raised and rationally motivated error-possibilities. Since radical skeptical error-possibilities are, by their nature, merely raised, an agent who is in a paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge does not need to provide independent reasons to dismiss them. I argued that this analysis does not accommodate the uncontroversial fact that the layperson can be convinced that radical skeptical error-possibilities are possible and that those arguments can proceed, not by invoking empirical considerations, but by imagining scenarios that verify radical skeptical hypotheses. After presenting a reconstruction of this a priori motivation of radical skeptical hypotheses, I submitted that attempts at recreating scenarios that verify radical skeptical hypotheses fall prey to one or another of three pitfalls: (1) incompleteness, (2) deep contradiction or (3) misconception. This diagnosis enabled us to improve upon Pritchard's undercutting strategy in two dimensions: it provided independent rational support that speaks to a priori motivated radical skeptical hypotheses and it offered the means of undercutting any formulation of radical skepticism that leans on the intuition that radical skeptical hypotheses *could* obtain. Of course, there might be other routes to establish the possibility of radical skeptical hypotheses. Alas, I am not aware of any promising alternative.

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