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Skeptics Can Win (But Almost Never Will)*

Timothy Pickavance

Abstract: I defend the radical claim that there are only two solutions to what Chisholm calls 'The Problem of the Criterion': methodological skepticism and a view which I would like to call 'particularism', if the label were not already taken. Finally, I consider how this result bears on a recent critique of skepticism offered by Thomas Kelly (2005), and argue that it fails.

Roderick Chisholm (1973) was right to claim that "'The Problem of the Criterion" seems ... to be one of the most important ... of all the problems of philosophy.' (p. 1) However, Chisholm, among others, misapprehends the space of solutions to the problem. In particular, Chisholm identifies two non-skeptical solutions, 'particularism' and 'methodism'. Thomas Kelly (2005) goes further, finding a spectrum between particularism and methodism. But I contend that Chisholm's and Kelly's ways of distinguishing particularism and methodism are inadequate; there is only one view there. I would like to call this view 'particularism', if the label were not already taken, because its method is nearly identical to Chisholm's particularism. In §2, I defend these claims. I go on in §3 to argue that the collapse of Chisholm's distinction and Kelly's spectrum points up a grave problem for Kelly's methodological critique of skepticism, which is present even granting Kelly's spectrum. But first, in §1, I chart the problem and what Chisholm and Kelly have claimed are its possible solutions.

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1. The Problem and its Putative Solutions

The Problem of the Criterion is one of epistemological methodology.¹ The question that a solution to the Problem will answer is, where is the right place to begin our inquiry? Let us work toward the Problem to make it precise and appreciate the sense in which it is a *problem*.

1.1 The Problem

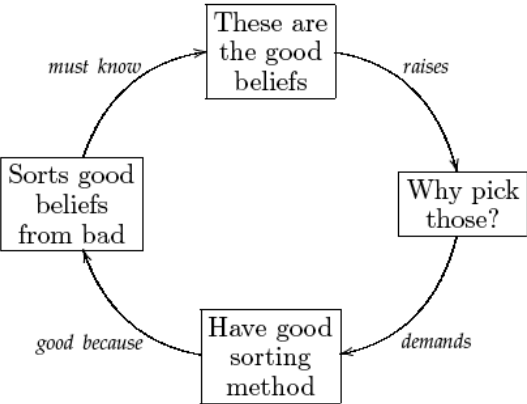
Suppose I claimed the following:

- I know I have hands.
- I know I do not have a headache.
- I know there is a computer in front of me.
- I know my son is asleep in the next room.

I believe each of these and take those beliefs to be among my best. I take myself to know them and am willing to claim that I know them. A natural question to ask about these claims to know is why I picked *those* beliefs as the good ones, why I am willing to claim to know those things, rather than others. That is, I would claim to know some things that I believe, but would not claim to know some other things that I believe. Why that asymmetry? A natural response is that I have employed some reliable method, some appropriate criterion (or criteria), for sorting my beliefs into the good ones—the ones I will claim come to knowledge—and the ones that are not good, or that are not good enough for me to claim are knowledge. Presumably, though, what makes my method reliable, my criterion appropriate, is that it says of good beliefs that they are good and of not-so-good beliefs that they are not-so-good. Thus, in order to justifiably employ that method I need some reason for thinking that the method *does* say of good beliefs that they are good and of not-so-good

¹ There are structurally similar problems in other areas of philosophy, e.g., in ethics. I will focus on epistemology in particular, and thus when I speak of ‘inquiry’ in the sequel, I mean specifically epistemological inquiry. However, I believe the sorts of considerations I raise here will carry over to those structurally similar problems in other areas.

beliefs that they are not-so-good. However, one cannot have such a reason without already being able to distinguish good beliefs from not-so-good beliefs. We are back to where we began. This diagram represents the problem:



If one starts with claims about which beliefs are good (the top), one finds the need for a good sorting method (the bottom). But to reasonably employ that method, one must know which beliefs are good. The Problem of the Criterion is a *problem*, then, because while it seems we can rightly claim to know all sorts of things, this cycle seems unbreakable, leaving us unable to rightly claim to know anything. In other words, we must be knowledge-claim skeptics. Notably, I take the Problem of the Criterion to concern what we can rightly *claim* (to know). The problem is that we seem to appropriately make knowledge claims, but the intuitive undergirding of that ability is troublingly circular. Many, including Ernest Sosa (1980) and Chisholm himself, in some places, discuss the Problem as one for second-order or ‘epistemic’ knowledge—knowledge of our knowledge—rather than for *claims* to first-order knowledge—claims to know some first-order claim. The Problem thus leads to epistemic, rather than knowledge-claim, skepticism. Only if knowledge is the norm of assertion do these two come

to the same, and I do not want enter that discussion here. (My characterization is compatible with knowledge being the norm of assertion; I only want to make room for those who disagree.) Importantly, epistemic skepticism follows fairly easily from knowledge-claim skepticism because, by all accounts, knowledge, together with some fairly easy to satisfy further constraints, is sufficient for appropriately asserting. Anyway, my characterization of the Problem is not new: Chisholm is first concerned with claims to knowledge (see (A) below), not with observations about second-order knowledge. Thus, my articulation of the Problem stays close to his own and clarifies the discussion in a way that is generally not represented in the literature.

1.2 And its Putative Solutions

Chisholm identified three possible solutions to the Problem of the Criterion: skepticism, particularism, and methodism. He supplies the following two pairs of questions to differentiate these views:

- (A) ‘*What* do we know? What is the *extent* of our knowledge?’
- (B) ‘How are we to decide *whether* we know? What are the *criteria* of knowledge?’ (1973, p. 13)

The ‘methodological’ skeptic, as I will call her, thinks one cannot answer (A) without having answered (B) but cannot answer (B) without having answered (A). Thus, the methodological skeptic thinks one cannot appropriately claim to know (or to not know!) anything. This view is compatible with our knowing a great many things. This sort of skeptic rejects only that we can appropriately claim to know. This is bad enough, for if we cannot claim to know anything, all manner of inquiry, including but not limited to epistemology, is hopeless.²

Chisholm identifies two other solutions, ‘particularism’ and

² Chisholm (1973) and others characterize the relevant skepticism as ‘second-order’, that is, as skepticism about epistemic claims. As noted above, I do not think this is the best way to carve the landscape, though the distinction between knowledge-claim skepticism and epistemic skepticism will not matter much here.

‘methodism’:

There are people ... who think that they do have an answer to B and that, given their answer to B, they can then figure out their answer to A. And there are other people ... who have it the other way around: they think that they have an answer to A and that, given their answer to A, they can then figure out the answer to B. (1973, pp. 14-5)

The particularist begins with claims to know certain things and goes on to develop a method for deciding whether, in various cases, we do in fact know. The methodist, on the other hand, begins with a method for deciding whether, in various cases, we do in fact know and goes on to decide whether, in those cases, we know. Particularists deny that an adequate answer to the question: ‘why put *those* claims on the list?’ requires that we have a good sorting method. Thus, particularists break the diagrammed circle by rejecting the arrow between three and six o’clock. Methodists deny that an appropriate reliance on a sorting method requires knowing which beliefs are good and bad. Thus, methodists reject the arrow between the nine and twelve o’clock positions.

Chisholm’s characterization of these two views dovetails nicely with Kelly’s (2005). According to Kelly:

Roughly, the particularist takes as data our considered judgments about whether knowledge is present or absent in particular cases (e.g., I know I have hands, I know that my name is Thomas Kelly ...). He then uses these judgments about particular cases to evaluate proposed general principles about knowledge. (2005, p. 197)

The methodist, according to Kelly, goes the other way, starting with general principles about knowledge which she uses to judge particular cases. The only apparent difference between Chisholm and Kelly here is that the former talks of ‘methods’ and ‘criteria’, whereas the latter talks of ‘general principles’. I will return to this difference below. At any rate, particularists, according to Kelly, will always allow particular judgments to trump general principles. Where there is conflict between the two, a particularist keeps her particular judgments and revises her general principles. Methodists will always allow general principles to trump

particular judgments. Where there is conflict, a methodist keeps her general principles and revises her particular judgments.

Kelly, unlike Chisholm, thinks of particularism and methodism as poles on a spectrum rather than as utterly distinct views. Between the poles of particularism and methodism, Kelly maintains that there are various sorts of 'reflective equilibrium'. While (extreme) particularism only gives weight to particular judgments, and (extreme) methodism only gives weight to general principles about knowledge, methodologies of reflective equilibrium give weight to both particular judgments and general principles. Where one falls on the spectrum between the poles is determined by how much relative weight one gives to particular judgments and general principles. Sometimes particular judgments trump general principles, and sometimes general principles trump particular judgments, and, crudely, the relative frequency of these trummings determines how closely one lies to one pole or the other. The more weight one gives to particular judgments when there is conflict, the more one's reflective equilibrium slides toward the particularism pole. Similarly in the other direction.

2. There is No Distinction Between Particularism and Methodism

We have a rough characterization of the particularism-methodism distinction. I have come to believe, however, that there really is no substantive, meaningful distinction there: it evaporates on close inspection. I can think of only two ways to make the distinction between particularism and methodism. (To be clear, I have no argument that these are the only two, and do not pretend to.) First and most naturally, one might exploit the distinction between *claims* and *methods*. Second, one might exploit the distinction between *particular* claims and *general* claims. Unfortunately, neither strategy substantiates the particularism-methodism distinction.

2.1 A Stage-Setting Argument for Particularism

Ironically, I want to begin by granting the particularism-methodism

distinction and making a simple-minded argument for particularism. The argument has two stages.

Stage One. Methodological skepticism is false. Here is why: I know some things, and it is appropriate for me to claim to know them. For example, I know I have hands; I know I do not have a headache; I know I am typing; the list could go on. Further, there is nothing wrong with my claiming to know these things. Methodological skepticism entails that I should not claim to know these things, so methodological skepticism is false.

Stage Two. Either particularism or methodism is true. But methodism faces a crippling dilemma. Call the method some methodist begins with *M*. (It does not matter that our methodist is limited to just one method; the dilemma does not trade on this fact.) Either this methodist claims, at the outset of inquiry, to know *M* is the correct method or she does not.

Suppose our methodist does not claim to know *M* is the correct method. Then her methodism is unacceptably arbitrary, as Chisholm argues. We must know that *M* is correct, and if we cannot claim to know, then we plausibly do *not* know, since knowledge of a proposition together with some easy to satisfy further constraints is, in very many situations and for most items of knowledge, enough to allow us to claim knowledge. Thus, if we are unable to claim to know (in these commonplace situations), it is unlikely that we do know. If we do not know that *M* is the correct method, then one wonders why one is using *M* rather than some other method. Further, and more importantly, this view is just a version of methodological skepticism, though the argument for that claim appears at the end of §2.3.

On the other hand, suppose our methodist claims to know *M* is the correct method. Then her methodism is simply particularism in disguise, for she is starting with a claim to know something, namely that *M* is the correct method.

The fundamental point is that the only viable methodism is rebranded particularism. To elude this dilemma, the methodist must

find a way to substantiate the particularism-methodism distinction. I presently turn to some ways one might try to do this.

2.2 *Claim v. Method*

One strategy for substantiating the particularism-methodism distinction exploits the distinction between claims and methods (or criteria). Particularism is then the view that one starts with a list of claims (to knowledge) and then develops a method. Methodism, by contrast, begins with a method and then settles whether various claims are known or not. This approach is particularly natural because of the obvious methodological flavor of these characterizations of particularism and methodism. Thus, this particularism-methodism distinction respects the fact that particularism and methodism are *methodologies*. It also comes close to Chisholm's (1973) characterizations of particularism and methodism noted above. (I suggest without argument if Chisholm had this strategy in mind, it explains why he did not think there was any spectrum between particularism and methodism.)

This way of drawing the distinction escapes the dilemma put to methodism above by resisting that a methodist's claim to know *M* is the correct method makes her view particularist. Despite that the methodist *would* make that claim, that is not the starting point for her. The starting point is just *M* itself. This horn-blunting further emphasizes the naturalness of this proposal, since forcing the methodist to admit, as a starting point, her claim to know *M* is correct, seems to compromise her methodist commitments.

However, this way of making the distinction will not do because methods and claims are, in this context, interchangeable. The initial claims of the particularist are easily converted into methods, and the methods of various methodists are easily converted into claims. These conversions do not upset the particularist or methodist spirit of the views; that is, one cannot transform a paradigmatically methodist view into a particularist view by taking that paradigm methodist's method and

converting it into a claim. I will defend this series of claims by applying the relevant conversions to a paradigm particularist and a paradigm methodist.

Consider first the paradigmatically particularist methodology displayed in a Moore-style response to skepticism. The Moorean (might) begin with a simple claim: I know I have hands. She then rejects as problematic any argument that her claim is false because it conflicts with the claim itself, regardless of the argument's plausibility. This is a special case of starting with a claim to know and going on to reject as faulty any method of deciding whether one knows that conflicts with one's initial claim. Now, suppose the Moorean had instead begun with the following method: reject as problematic any argument whose conclusion is the proposition that I do not know I have hands. The Moorean would be no less a particularist for that change. That the starting point is a claim rather than a method seems to do no work in making our Moorean a particularist. Generalizing, one can convert any claim into a corresponding method, and in no case can one plausibly conclude that one has turned a particularist into a methodist.

Now consider the methodism displayed in Locke's empiricism. Chisholm's Locke begins by saying, 'the way you decide whether a belief is likely to be a genuine case of knowledge [is by seeing] whether it is derived from sense experience' (Chisholm (1973), p. 16). Locke begins with a methodology and proceeds to judge claims to know. Suppose that Locke had instead begun by claiming that something counts as knowledge only if it is derived from sense experience. This methodology is no less methodist. Again, this conversion is easily generalizable. The claim-method distinction is not adequate to the task of distinguishing particularism from methodism.

2.3 Particular v. General

The most natural next strategy for substantiating the particularism-methodism distinction distinguishes between the claims with which methodists and particularists respectively start. The most—only?—

plausible version of this strategy has the methodist begin with general claims (or ‘principles’) and the particularist with particular claims.

This strategy resembles Kelly’s (2005), noted above. It is also friendly with Noah Lemos’s (2004) discussion of *The Problem of the Criterion*. Lemos distinguishes two theses which distinguish particularism from methodism:

The Dependence of Particular Judgments (DPJ)

One’s knowledge, if any, of particular epistemic propositions depends on one’s knowing general epistemic principles or criteria.

The Dependence of General Principles (DGP)

One’s knowledge, if any, of general epistemic principles or criteria depends on one’s knowing particular epistemic propositions. (2004, p. 109)

Methodists accept and particularists reject DPJ, while particularists accept and methodists reject DGP. The emphasis here is on particular judgments and general principles. Indeed, there is no mention of ‘methods’ at all.

If we can distinguish particular and general claims, we can blunt the second horn of the methodist’s dilemma by distinguishing between what particularists and methodists claim to know at the outset of inquiry. Succeeding at that task provides a way of distinguishing methodism from particularism, which was the challenge (or anyway half of the challenge) posed by the second horn.

But what exactly *is* the distinction between particular and general claims? Maybe more importantly, must the particularist begin with only particular claims? I will take these questions in turn.

The only plausible way to distinguish between particular and general claims is in terms of content. Particular claims have ‘particular’ content. General claims have ‘general’ content. This is no help yet: we must understand what makes a *content* particular rather than general. A promising strategy for understanding this latter distinction—indeed, it is the only strategy I can conjure!—begins with this initial characterization:

P. A claim is particular if and only if it is about a single case (or

situation, state of affairs, etc.)

- G. A claim is general if and only if it about many cases (or situations, state of affairs, etc.)

This seems to match intuitive judgments about which claims are particular and general. For example, ‘this raven is black’ seems to be particular because it is about a single case, namely, whether this raven is black or not. ‘All ravens are black’, which is paradigmatically general, is about many cases, namely, whether lots of ravens are black. And these claims’ being about one and many, respectively, seems to be what *makes* them particular and general, respectively. I will offer a series of possibilities for how one might capitalize on this simple-minded, plausible idea, for we need to understand what it is for a claim to be ‘about a single case’ or ‘about many cases’.

Attempt 1:

- S₁. A claim is about a single case if and only if there is a single state of affairs the obtaining of which is sufficient for the truth of the claim.
- M₁. A claim is about many cases if and only if there are many states of affairs the collective obtaining of which is necessary and sufficient for the truth of the claim.

Troublingly, Attempt 1 classifies paradigmatically general claims as about a single case. Consider:

- I. Introspection is a source of knowledge.

(I) is general, but the obtaining of a single state of affairs is sufficient for its truth, namely *introspection’s being a source of knowledge*. Similarly, the obtaining of the single state of affairs, *there being nothing non-identical to itself*, is sufficient for the truth of the paradigmatically general law of identity. No doubt (I) and the law of identity count as being about many cases as well, and so would *also* be general. There are many and varied states of affairs the collective obtaining of which are necessary and

sufficient for their truth. No matter, though. If we are trying to use the particular-general distinction to clarify the particularism-methodism distinction so that methodism will not count as particularism, then no claim can be particular *and* general! Attempt 1 will not do.

Attempt 2 promises to rectify the trouble with Attempt 1:

S₂. A claim is about a single case if and only if

- i. there is a state of affairs the obtaining of which is sufficient for the truth of the claim, and
- ii. there is no multi-member set of states of affairs the collective obtaining of which is necessary for the truth of the claim.

M₂. A claim is about many cases if and only if it not about a single case.

Unfortunately, nothing counts as about a single case on this proposal. Consider:

L. I have a son named 'Lyle'.

(L) is a paradigmatically particular claim, but the following set of states of affairs must collectively obtain for (L) to be true:

L_s. {*My having a son named 'Lyle', 2+2's being 4*}

One could produce an endless list of such sets. (L) does not satisfy the right-hand side of (S₂). I take it the way to generalize from (L) is easy to see as well. Every paradigmatically particular claim has this trouble.

One might try to fix Attempt 2 by substituting Attempt 3:

S₃. A claim is about a single case if and only if

- i. there is a state of affairs the obtaining of which is sufficient for the truth of the claim, and
- ii. there is only one state of affairs *s* such that each member of any set of states of affairs the collective obtaining of

which is necessary for the truth of the claim either

- a. is identical to *s*, or
- b. is included by but does not include *s*.³

M₃. A claim is about many cases if and only if it is not about a single case.

Our problem with Attempt 2 remains. The target 's' from clause (ii) for (L) is *my having a son named 'Lyle'*. That state of affairs includes *but is also included by*:

L'. *My having a son named 'Lyle' or 2+2's being 5*

Thus (L) still fails clause (ii) of (S₃) and so does not count as particular, as it should. Again, the problem generalizes. I submit that Attempts 2 and 3 are not on the right heading to repair Attempt 1.⁴ We need a different tack.

Suppose we supplement Attempt 1 by insisting that the single state of affairs sufficient for the truth of a claim about a single case—that is, a particular claim—must be metaphysically 'fundamental'. This is Attempt 1.1:

S_{1.1}. A claim is about a single case if and only if there is a single *fundamental* state of affairs the obtaining of which is sufficient for the truth of the claim (even if there are many fundamental states of affairs the collective obtaining of which is necessary and sufficient for the truth of the claim).

M_{1.1}. A claim is about many cases if and only if it is not about a single case.

The trouble for Attempt 1 was that claims like (I) and the law of identity

3 State of affairs *s* includes state of affairs *s'* if and only if, necessarily, if *s* obtains then *s'* obtains.

4 There are still more complicated iterations of this general strategy that one might try, but I know of none that successfully do the work needed.

wound up counting as particular because the obtaining of the states of affairs *introspection's being a source of knowledge* and *there being nothing nonidentical to itself* are, respectively, sufficient for the truth of (I) and the law of identity. But maybe these states of affairs are not fundamental, in the sense that they obtain *because* some other states of affairs obtain.

Whether you are happy with metaphysical dependence or not, this proposal will not help. Consider the following:

K. I know that my son's name is 'Lyle'.

I_k. I know that introspection is a source of knowledge.

Either both of these are particular given Attempt 1.1, or neither are. If the former, then even if we have got the right particular-general distinction, it will be of no use to the methodist who wants to respond to the dilemma. If the latter, then Attempt 1.1 classifies paradigmatically particular claims—(K), for example—as general, and so is unacceptable. I will take these options in reverse order.

Suppose knowledge is not a fundamental relation. (You might think this because you think that knowledge is analyzable into belief plus other things.) (K) thus comes out general. Here is why. The only single state of affairs sufficient for the truth of (K) is *my standing in the knowledge relation to the proposition that my son's name is Lyle*'. This state of affairs involves a non-fundamental relation, however, and so should not count as fundamental. But (K) is paradigmatically particular, so if Attempt 1.1 is to succeed, knowledge must be a fundamental relation (or, bizarrely, fundamental states of affairs can involve non-fundamental properties and relations).

So suppose knowledge is a fundamental relation between a knower and a proposition. (K) thus comes out particular. Here is why. The obtaining of the single state of affairs *my standing in the knowledge relation to the proposition that my son's name is 'Lyle'* is sufficient for the truth of (K). That state of affairs is also fundamental. It involves only myself (a fundamental individual), the knowledge relation (an *ex hypothesi* fundamental relation), and the proposition that my son's name is 'Lyle'

(a single proposition and therefore a fundamental entity). And plausibly, states of affairs involving only fundamental entities are fundamental. (K) thus satisfies (S_{1,1}). However, the same sort of reasoning shows that (I_k) satisfies (S_{1,1}). The state of affairs *my standing in the knowledge relation to the proposition that introspection is a source of knowledge* involves only myself, the knowledge relation, and the proposition that introspection is a source of knowledge. That state of affairs is thus fundamental, and its obtaining is sufficient for the truth of (I_k).

I can think of no other promising strategy for making the particular-general distinction.

I noted a second question, even granting the particular-general distinction, namely whether particularists *qua* particularists must begin only with particular knowledge claims. I will not belabor this point because we will face a similar question below, but the answer is that particularists are *not* so committed. There are general claims to which paradigmatically particularist methodologies may rightly appeal. Obvious examples include the law of non-contradiction and the law of identity, the claim that valid arguments are better than invalid ones, that inference to the best explanation is an acceptable argument form, and so on. None of these fall on the particular side of the inchoate particular-general distinction; indeed, they all seem *paradigmatically* general! Thus we have two reasons why the particular-general distinction cannot substantiate the particularism-methodism distinction: (i) there is no substantive distinction between particular and general claims and (ii) even if there were, particularists may rightly begin with general claims.

There is one final move the methodist might make here. The methodist might say that (I_k) is not a general principle *about knowledge*, and so is not the sort of thing that methodists would start with. While (I) is a general principle about knowledge, (I_k) is a particular claim about the author of this paper's standing with respect to a certain proposition. Further, while non-contradiction and the law of identity are general, they are not general principles *about knowledge*. The methodist begins with general principles about knowledge, while the particularist does not.

This move ploughs the methodist into the trouble we had with making the particularism-methodism distinction via the claim-method distinction. One is no less a methodist because one begins with the particular claim to know that *M* is the right method rather than with the (let us grant) general claim that *M* is the right method. This transformation is trivial, and we could make it for any version of methodism. Such a transformation should not be available on the supposition that the particularism-methodism distinction is substantive.

Given that these proposals for making the particularism-methodism fail (and that there are no alternative proposals available, which I again assume without argument), there is no substantive distinction between particularism and methodism. The Problem of the Criterion can be solved with either methodological skepticism or methodological anti-skepticism. Happily, as Chisholm points out, ‘we *do* know many things after all.’ (1973, p. 38) Methodological skepticism would keep us from rightly making that claim, so it is false.

I would like to call methodological anti-skepticism ‘particularism’. The view will just start with a list of plausible claims and proceed from there to evaluating those claims’ relative merits in cases of conflict, deducing further claims from them, and so on. That sounds a lot like Chisholm’s particularism. But it is not the same, and the label is taken. Our exploration of the dilemma for methodism revealed not only that methodism collapses into particularism, but that particularism collapses into methodism as well. To make the distinction between the two we either need the distinction between claim and method to do work it is ill-equipped to do, or we need the distinction between particular and general to be substantive, which it is not. ‘Methodological anti-skepticism’ will have to do.

What about the first horn of the dilemma, on which the methodist simply does *not* claim to know that her method is the correct one? Is there not a third view here, which we might rightly call ‘methodism’? I do not think so; it is just a strange variety of methodological skepticism. Given that the claim-method distinction cannot distinguish this view

from methodological anti-skepticism, and that the particular-general distinction does not exist, the distinction between this ‘third’ view and methodological anti-skepticism is this: the methodological anti-skeptic claims to know her starting points whereas ‘third’ view advocates do not. But being unable to claim to know starting points is just methodological skepticism! The difference is that this ‘third’ view asserts that we are able to decide whether we know whether certain judgments are true on the basis of starting points which are not known. This is an unstable position. If I cannot claim to know a crucial premise in a kind of argument for the claim that I know p , then it is unclear how that argument could support its conclusion. Methodological skepticism is threatening *because* this does not seem possible. This type of methodism is of a piece with methodological skepticism, which is to say it is not a third view at all, despite that it is not particularist.

3. Thus Kelly’s Methodological Critique of Skepticism Fails

The lack of a particularism-methodism distinction matters for Kelly’s (2005) critique of skepticism. The skepticism in view there is first-order, not methodological. Kelly’s targets are external world skeptics, moral skeptics, modal skeptics, etc. They are skeptics not about the propriety of our claims to know, but about the knowledge itself. I argue that Kelly’s critique fails if there is no particularism-methodism distinction, and that this failure displays why his critique fails even given the distinction.

Kelly’s critique of skepticism cannot be sustained without the distinction between particularism and methodism because it relies on the claim that skeptics are radical methodists (or that methodism is the most comfortable methodology for the skeptic). Kelly says:

The picture that the skeptic presupposes seems to be something like the following. There are certain philosophical principles that have radically revisionary implications. The intuitive plausibility of these principles renders them worthy of belief at the outset of inquiry. Moreover, this belief worthiness is indefeasible in the following sense: it survives the realization that the principles in question are inconsistent with large numbers of our

most fundamental judgments about cases. (2005, p. 201)

The skeptic, on this ‘picture’, is operating as a methodist (on Kelly’s characterization of methodism). Methodists begin with principles about knowledge, which principles are more or less indefeasible depending on the strength of one’s methodism, and proceeds to judge cases. Since methodism is untenable, Kelly concludes that skepticism requires a suspect methodology and can thus be ruled out on purely methodological grounds.

If there is no distinction between particularism and methodism, then this criticism must fail. That is all there is to that.

However, this problem should give us pause regarding Kelly’s methodological critique of skepticism *even given the distinction between particularism and methodism*. To see why, we need to develop his critique in more detail. Kelly defends a metaphilosophical, ‘Moorean’ response to the skeptic. Kelly initially summarizes the Moorean argument like this:

I believe that the view that Moore’s deepest point against the skeptic is a metaphilosophical one is correct. Why can’t the skeptic win? The Moorean’s best answer to this question, I think, runs as follows: the skeptic cannot win because the skeptic is implicitly committed to a methodology for philosophical theorizing that does not withstand scrutiny once it is forced out into the open. (2005, p. 197)

The idea is that the skeptic must commit to a faulty methodology. In particular, the skeptic cannot accommodate ‘Moorean facts’, ‘those things,’ according to David Lewis (1996), ‘that we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary’ (p. 549).

Moorean facts are immune to philosophical assault. This is because to declare something a Moorean fact is to endorse a policy and make a prediction about some judgment, *F*. The policy is to judge as bad any argument which concludes not-*F*. The prediction is that one will never encounter an argument which rationally undermines one’s belief that *F*. If you endorse this policy and, on that basis, make that prediction, then

you have declared that judgment to be a Moorean fact for you. You thereby adopt a Moorean fact. On this view, facts do not present themselves to us as Moorean; rather, facts are *made* to be Moorean because we adopt a certain policy and make a certain prediction about them. Importantly, Kelly has no trouble with this; his ‘sympathies lie with the Moorean’ (2005, p. 181).

The Moorean, as one who embraces Moorean facts, incurs the following methodological commitment, according to Kelly:

[T]here are some particular judgements inconsistency with which suffices to undermine the credibility of a general principle to the point that it is reasonable to reject that principle. (2005, p. 203)

Skeptics, who are (most comfortable being) methodists, cannot accommodate this commitment, requiring as it does the immunity of some *particular* judgments to philosophical critique. The skeptic’s general principles, in particular her stringent principles about what is required for knowledge and the like, are all that are immune to philosophical critique. This fact, according to Kelly, makes the skeptic’s methodology unacceptable.

With Kelly, my sympathies lie with the Moorean. Unlike Kelly, though, I do not see why the skeptic is unable to accommodate Moorean facts. The trouble is surprisingly simple: all the skeptic must do to count as a Moorean (whether or not she is a methodist) is to endorse a policy and make a prediction regarding her judgment that some skepticism-inducing constraint is true. That is, all she must do is *declare* that constraint a Moorean fact (for her). No matter that this kind of Moorean is a methodist. She is still a Moorean, through and through, for she embraces a Moorean fact.

This conflicts with Kelly’s statement about the Moorean’s methodological commitment, noted two paragraphs above. Kelly insists that the Moorean must be committed to the claim that some *particular judgments* trump some *general principles*. But Kelly’s argument supports no such view. The Moorean, as Kelly describes her earlier in the paper, only must think that some judgments are immune to rational undermining (no

matter whether those judgments are particular or general).

Indeed, Moorean facts do not seem to be isolated to particular judgments, even on Kelly's view. Nowhere in Lewis's (1996) description of Moorean facts does the particular judgment-general principle distinction arise, and it does not arise in Kelly's either. That distinction does not show up in Kelly (2005) until very late, when he is specifically addressing the trouble with skepticism. Further, at least one of the paradigm cases of Moorean facts Kelly cites early on clearly counts, to my ear, as a general principle (insofar as I understand the particular-general distinction!), notably David Armstrong's (1983) claim that inductive inference is rational. Still further, 'we know a lot' and 'things move', again offered as paradigm Moorean facts by Kelly because cited as such by others, at best straddle the divide between particular judgements and general principles. Less controversially, fundamental logical and metaphysical laws like that of non-contradiction and of identity seem to function as Moorean facts for a great many philosophers but are not particular judgments in any meaningful sense.

To feel the force of these considerations, suppose I made it a policy to declare as bad any argument whose conclusion denied something on the following list, and made a prediction that my belief in the items of the following list would never be undermined:

- I have hands.
- There is an external world.
- I know a lot.
- Everything is identical to itself.
- No proposition is both true and not true at the same time.

Moore himself, I conjecture, would be perfectly happy with these declarations. And most committed to the spirit of a Moorean methodology, as described by Kelly, would be happy as well. I doubt, for example, that a committed Moorean would chide me for including the

law of non-contradiction, or accuse me of going beyond a Moorean methodology by doing so.

Kelly overreaches when he claims Mooreans must be committed to there being some particular judgments which trump some general principles. This is true *even if* almost every Moorean will include on his or her list of Moorean facts at least one particular judgment. That Mooreans tend to do this is not a result of their *methodology*, but of how they deploy that methodology. The methodology only requires that there be some judgments immune to being rationally undermined. This much the methodist can be happy with. Indeed, it is hard to see how a methodist's principle(s) about knowledge could be rationally undermined in the course of inquiry, given the role that that principle or those principles play.

The skeptic who is also a methodist ought just declare that her skepticism-inducing constraints on knowledge are Moorean facts. She will thereby be immune from Kelly's criticism of the skeptic's methodology, depending as it does on the claim that skeptics cannot accommodate Moorean facts.

Kelly does make another point against the skeptic's methodology, however:

[T]he following seems to me to be a fairly telling point in favor of the Moorean: the methodology which the skeptic advocates seems utterly at variance with the methodology employed elsewhere in philosophy in the assessment of general principles. (2005, p. 201)

Kelly is here asserting a claim, which he goes on to defend, that philosophical history is decidedly non-methodist methodologically. He notes that the reaction to Gettier has judgments about specific cases trumping a plausible general theory of knowledge. Positivism was doomed by troubles it had accommodating our judgments that particular sentences were meaningful. And so on. Nonetheless, I think Kelly overstates the issue, for it is often the case that general principles win out over particular judgments. For example, very few are willing to give up the law of non-contradiction, despite the very plausible

judgement that the Liar sentence is both true and false. Many are unwilling to abandon epistemic closure even when faced with the lottery paradox; rather, they embrace the initially implausible view that we know which ticket will win, do not know that we will lose, or search about for some other solution that does not require giving up closure.⁵ Non-contradiction and closure are both general principles which apparently trump judgments about specific cases for very many philosophers. All that is to say, while philosophical history is peppered with examples of judgments about cases trumping principles, it is also peppered with examples of principles trumping judgments about cases. The skeptic *qua* methodist, then, is not committed to a methodology ‘utterly at variance’ with widespread philosophical practice. Sometimes general principles are initially plausible (a point Kelly seems to recognize; cf. the ‘picture the skeptic presupposes’ noted above); sometimes those principles are even common-sensical, which is what the Moorean ought to be committed to (more or less) preserving. But as John Hawthorne notes,

The whole point ... is that common sense pushes us in different directions. A war of words deploying the ‘It is common sense that’ operator seems to have no clear victor. (2004, p. 126)

Amen.

Maybe, though, it is more than just the methodology of the skeptic that is at issue; maybe it is the fact that the skeptic embraces radically revisionary principles. Recall Kelly’s claim, quoted above, that the skeptic’s philosophical principles have ‘radically revisionary implications’. Revisionism alone cannot be enough, since the Moorean is also forced to revise her opinions about certain things in light of conflict with judgments she simply will not sacrifice. Unfortunately, we are not told what it is for a principle to be *radically* revisionary. I do not think it matters, though, since certain paradigmatically particular judgments can force revisions that are fairly radical. Consider the lottery paradox.

⁵ See, e.g., Hawthorne (2004).

There is a conflict between the following three claims, each of which is highly plausible:

- I do not know I will not win the lottery.
- I know I will not be able to afford a trip to France next summer.
- Competent deduction extends knowledge.

Given the great plausibility of the third of these, many philosophers opt to give up on the first or the second. (Notice that this reaction is compatible with Kelly's characterization of the Moorean.) Suppose I give up the second. Then I have to give up all sorts of other claims as well. For example, I would have to give up the claim that I know I will not be able to afford a trip to Italy next summer, and the claim that I will not be able any time soon to afford a new BMC Impec outfitted with SRAM Red and DT Swiss RRCs, and so on. The number of revisions is more or less endless. Whatever it takes for revisions to be 'radical', this set will count. A Moorean methodology is thus compatible with the possibility of radical revisionism, and so the fact that skeptic's principles have radically revisionary implications cannot be a telling methodological strike against her. Indeed, we have found that there does not seem to be anything specially wrong about the skeptic's methodology, at least by Kelly's lights. The skeptic can believe in Moorean facts even if she is a methodist. In fact, if I am correct that there is only methodological skepticism and methodological anti-skepticism, first-order skeptics, insofar as they are not methodological skeptics, are committed to the right methodology after all! The skeptic, then, *can* win, in the sense that her methodology need not be flawed.

Nonetheless, I believe the skeptic almost never will win. The reason is simple: the skepticism-inducing principles wielded by the skeptic simply are not very plausible when compared with my claim to know that I have hands, that there is an external world, that there are other minds, and so on. The problem for the picture that Kelly says drives the skeptic is not the methodology, but the falsity of the claim that the principles about

knowledge are intuitively plausible and worthy of belief at the outset of inquiry! Skeptics can win, then, but (happily) almost never will.

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