Abstract: Jonathan Schaffer (2010) has summoned a new sort of demon – what he calls the debasing demon – that apparently threatens all of our purported knowledge. We show that any debasing skeptical argument must attack the justification condition and can do so only if a plausible thesis about justification is false.

Jonathan Schaffer (2010) has summoned a new sort of demon – what he calls the debasing demon – that apparently threatens all of our purported knowledge. Schaffer’s incantation begins with three plausible principles (p. 232):

1. Knowledge requires the production of belief, properly based on the evidence.
2. Any belief can be produced on an improper basis.
3. It is always possible, when a belief is produced on an improper basis, for it to seem later as if one had produced a belief properly based on the evidence.

These principles make possible Schaffer’s debasing demon – a demon that can systematically ensure all of our beliefs are improperly based (by 2), though they appear to be properly based (by 3). The demon can eliminate our knowledge (by 1) – without making any of our beliefs false. ‘The debasing demon threatens universal doubt,’ says Schaffer, ‘in the sense of threatening knowledge of any proposition p’ (p. 228).

Shall we fear the debasing demon? Anthony Brueckner (2011) claims this demon is a threat only if an implausible epistemic thesis, the ‘KK’ thesis, is true. But Brueckner takes it for granted that debasing skepticism must go through a particular argument schema. We establish a stronger result here. To begin with, we show that any debasing skeptical argument must attack the justification condition (§1). This result brings an important consequence: debasing skepticism attacks justification only if a plausible
thesis about justification – sometimes called ‘Transparency’ – is false (§2). We conclude by considering an objection to our argument (§3).

At first glance, debasing skepticism might seem to pose a threat. We’ll suggest that careful reflection raises doubts about how, and whether, it threatens knowledge.

1. Skepticism and the justification condition

In general, how do skeptical scenarios threaten knowledge? Schaffer contrasts Descartes’ deceiving demon with his own debasing demon: ‘[t]he deceiving demon imperils knowledge via the truth requirement. He makes what is false seem true’, whereas the debasing demon ‘preys not on the truth requirement but rather on the basing requirement’ (p. 231). This is too quick.

Skeptical arguments generally proceed as follows. The skeptic first identifies a skeptical scenario – a possible situation in which things are not as they seem. Then the skeptic identifies a plausible principle that entails that if her scenario is possible, we lack knowledge of one sort or another. If these principles – conjoined with skeptical possibilities – entail that we lack knowledge, they must entail that we fail to meet at least one of the conditions required for knowledge. Let us assume, with Schaffer, that we know that proposition $p$ iff $p$ is true, we believe that $p$, we are (propositionally) justified in believing $p$, we are not ‘gettiered’, and our belief that $p$ is not debased (p. 231).

As we just said, skeptical arguments identify plausible principles that, when conjoined with a skeptical possibility, entail that one or other condition on knowledge fails. Which condition do standard skeptical arguments attack? In Descartes’ deception scenario, the demon guarantees that our beliefs are systematically mistaken. The skeptic wants to argue from this possibility to the claim that we actually do not know that $p$ – even if we are not actually deceived by the demon. Which condition on knowledge must this skeptic’s principle attack? Plainly, she will be unable to find a plausible principle that moves from this possibility to the claim $p$ is actually false; the deceiving demon skeptic does not attack the truth condition. Equally plainly, the skeptic will not come forward with a plausible principle that moves from the skeptical possibility to the claim that we do not actually believe that $p$. The skeptic hopes, after all, to argue that our beliefs do not amount to knowledge and thus she leaves the belief condition alone. Importantly, the same reasoning shows that the deceiving demon skeptic does not attack the ‘anti-gettier’ condition or the basing condition either. Only the propositional justification condition remains. The deceiving demon skeptic seeks a principle that entails we are not justified to
believe $p$ if it is possible that the demon is deceiving us about $p$. None of this should be surprising.

Unlike the deceiving demon, the debasing demon does not make our beliefs false. Nor does the demon eliminate the reasons we have to believe, the fact that we believe, or the fact that we are not ‘gettiered’. In a debasing scenario, a demon makes our beliefs seem based on our reasons, even though they are not. Debasing scenarios are unlike deception scenarios, but they both must threaten knowledge in the same way: through the justification condition.

After all, how could the fact that there is a possibility, raised by the debasing scenario, in which your belief is true, show that it is actually false? Similarly, how could the fact that there is a possibility in which you believe $p$ show that you actually do not believe it? How could a possibility in which you are not ‘gettiered’ show you actually are? Likewise, the mere possibility that you are debased does not entail that you actually are. The debasing skeptic needs a plausible principle to show that at least one of the conditions on knowledge is inconsistent with the possibility of her scenario. Once again, only the propositional justification condition remains. We conclude that if the debasing scenario threatens our knowledge that $p$, there must be a plausible principle which entails that the debasing scenario’s possibility is inconsistent with our having propositional justification to believe $p$. (An upshot: Schaffer’s claim that his scenario ‘preys on’ the basing requirement [p. 231] is misleading.)

Allow us to short-circuit one potential confusion about how the debasing demon acts. It is easy to think that the debasing demon attacks doxastic justification – after all, the demon makes our beliefs improperly based in the debasing scenario. But this is a mistake. On the standard conception, doxastic justification is just propositional justification plus the satisfaction of the basing condition. The debasing scenario does not threaten the basing condition, for the possibility that we are debased does not show that we actually are debased (nor does Schaffer say it does). If, as we have argued, the debasing skeptic must attack our justification, it is our propositional justification she must aim for. The elimination of propositional justification will, in turn, eliminate doxastic justification, but the debasing skeptic must first confront the former.

2. Transparency and debasing

Schaffer contends that the debasing scenario presents a novel skeptical threat to all of our purported knowledge. We have shown that this is so only if there is a plausible principle that entails that if the debasing scenario is possible, then we are not propositionally justified to believe that $p$. Is there such a principle? That is an important question concerning the
viability of debasing skepticism. We shall now argue that any such principle is false if the following popular thesis is true:

Transparency: The question whether one is justified to believe \( p \) is transparent to the question whether \( p \), in the sense that one’s answer to the latter always determines one’s answer to the former.\(^6\)

We interpret the determination relation normatively. That is:

Transparency: One should not [(say ‘yes’ to the question whether \( p \) and ‘no’ to the question whether one is justified to believe \( p \)) or (say ‘no’ to the question whether \( p \) and ‘yes’ to the question whether one is justified to believe \( p \))].\(^7\)

Transparency is plausible. It’s hard to imagine circumstances in which one could rationally say one thing about \( p \) and another thing about whether one is justified to believe \( p \).

We will now show that, assuming Transparency, the possibility of the debasing scenario is no threat to justification. To proceed, we help ourselves to a term of art. Let us say that a possibility \( O \) is irrelevant to one’s belief that \( p \) just in case the fact that \( O \) is possible does not entail that one should not believe \( p \). Now, pick at random a first-order belief of yours that \( p \).\(^8\) As we see it, the possibility that you are debased is irrelevant to your belief that \( p \). For the possibility that you are debased is a possibility in which \( p \) is still true. Even if you were to discover that you in fact were debased, that should not change your answer to the question whether \( p \): for you would know (by the definition of a debasing scenario) that \( p \) was true – you would know that you were in a \( p \)-world. In essence, the debasing skeptic highlights two distinct possibilities: (i) \( p \) is true, you have adequate reasons for \( p \), and your belief is based on those reasons, or (ii) \( p \) is true, you have adequate reasons for \( p \), but your belief is not based on those reasons. Insofar as your question is just whether \( p \), it does not matter which possibility actually holds. Either way, \( p \) is true. So the possibility that you are debased does not impugn your belief that \( p \) – it is irrelevant to your belief that \( p \).

We now require a simple corollary of Transparency:

C: If one should say ‘no’ to the question whether one is justified to believe \( p \), then one should not say ‘yes’ to the question whether \( p \).\(^9\)

Recall that we established in §1 that the debasing skeptic needs a principle to move from the possibility that you are debased to your actually lacking propositional justification. We are now positioned to see that no such
principle can be correct if Transparency is true. If the possibility of debasing entailed that you lack justification for \( p \), then, by C, that possibility would entail that you should not believe \( p \). But we have just established that the possibility of debasing is irrelevant to your belief that \( p \): it does not entail that you shouldn’t believe \( p \). So, by C, it doesn’t entail that you lack justification for \( p \). Without the possibility of such an entailment, the debasing scenario poses no threat. We conclude that the debasing scenario threatens our knowledge only if Transparency is false.

Lest the reader suspect philosophical sleight of hand, it is worth noting the steep challenge faced by the debasing skeptic. She has drawn our attention to a possible scenario. In it, our beliefs are true and we have all the reasons for them we think we have – it is just that they are improperly based in that scenario. Given this possibility, the debasing skeptic must argue that our beliefs are not actually propositionally justified. Is there a reasonable move from the mere possibility that our beliefs are true and supported by good reasons to the conclusion they are not actually supported by good reasons? That seems doubtful. Indeed, Transparency explains why that move is doubtful. Transparency guards us against the debasing demon’s wiles.

3. An objection and a reply

We anticipate an objection to our claim that debasing skepticism must attack the justification condition. As Schaffer noted (p. 234, fn. 7), and Brueckner (2011) called attention to, Schaffer’s debasing argument goes through the ‘KK’ thesis – the thesis that if one knows, then one knows that one knows. If the debasing skeptic can threaten our knowledge by showing that we lack knowledge of knowledge, why think she must threaten justification, as we have contended?

Suppose that the debasing skeptic now argues along familiar lines that her possibility shows that we do not know that we know. The possibility that we are debased is a possibility in which we do not know, says the skeptic, and if we cannot rule out that possibility, we cannot know that we know. With KK in hand, it follows that we do not know.

By way of reply, it seems to us that the KK argument does – indeed, must – attack our (first-order) propositional justification. To see why, recall the form of the debasing skeptic’s KK argument. She seeks to show that, since we cannot rule out the possibility that our belief that \( p \) is debased, we cannot know that we know that \( p \). By KK, it follows immediately that we do not know that \( p \). It is because our belief is possibly debased that it doesn’t amount to knowledge.

In §1 we argued that the possibility that our belief that \( p \) is debased is consistent with each of the following: that \( p \) is true, we believe that \( p \), our
belief that \( p \) is based on the reasons we have to believe \( p \), and we are not ‘Gettiered’ with respect to \( p \). So, if the debasing skeptic claims that her possibility entails – even through KK – that we do not know, it must entail that we are not propositionally justified to believe \( p \). After all, if the debasing skeptic is claiming to show we do not know, then she must be showing that we do not satisfy (at least) one of the conditions on knowing that \( p \). If each of the conditions besides propositional justification is consistent with the debasing scenario, the skeptic must be trying to show that we lack propositional justification to believe \( p \).\textsuperscript{11}

Of course, if Transparency is correct, then propositional justification to believe \( p \) is also consistent with the possibility that our belief that \( p \) is debased. So with Transparency, all of the conditions on knowing that \( p \) are consistent with the debasing scenario. Suppose the debasing skeptic is right that her scenario shows that we cannot know that we know. Then knowing that \( p \) would be consistent with not knowing that one knows that \( p \). So, we once again conclude, debasing scenarios do not threaten our knowledge unless Transparency is false.

Let us close. In §1, we argued the debasing skeptic’s threat requires a plausible principle that entails we lack propositional justification to believe \( p \) if it is possible that our belief that \( p \) is debased. Then in §2 we observed that any such principle is false if Transparency is true. Turning finally to an objection in §3, we defended our argument. Although the debasing demon seems to us to be perfectly possible, whether it threatens our knowledge is far from settled.\textsuperscript{12}

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NOTES

\textsuperscript{1} Propositional justification is typically contrasted with doxastic justification, which builds in the basing condition. One natural way of understanding propositional justification is in terms of epistemic reasons: a thinker is propositionally justified to believe \( p \) iff she has adequate reasons for \( p \). That thinker is doxastically justified in believing \( p \) if she believes \( p \) on the basis of the reasons in virtue of which she is propositionally justified. For more on this distinction, see Bergmann, 2006, p. 4; Conee and Feldman, 1985, p. 24; and Firth, 1978, p. 217–20. See also Goldman’s distinction between \textit{ex ante} and \textit{ex post} justification (1979, p. 21). For more on the basing relation, see Evans, forthcoming; McCain, 2012; Korcz, 1997.

\textsuperscript{2} Following Schaffer, we are assuming an analysis of knowledge under which a Gettier condition can be independently factored from justification, truth, and basing conditions.

\textsuperscript{3} This move requires the assumption (noted above) that the Gettier condition is independent of the propositional justification condition. This is vexed under certain externalist analyses of knowledge (safety-type analyses, say) where the justification condition is either jettisoned or radically reinterpreted, but then, so is the role of basing vexed under such analyses. We follow Schaffer in setting such complications aside and focusing on a ‘classical’ analysis of knowledge.
We are grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

For more on the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification, see footnote 1.

This is the ‘should’ of epistemic rationality. Some of the authors cited discuss a stronger thesis according to which the determination in question is constitutive – saying ‘yes’ to the question whether $p$ is saying ‘yes’ to the question whether one is justified to believe $p$. Our thesis is weaker in the sense that it is trivially entailed by theirs, assuming it’s trivial that one shouldn’t give different answers to the same question.

We limit the argument to first-order beliefs for a reason: the possibility that your belief that $p$ is debased is in fact relevant to your meta-belief that your belief that $p$ is not debased.

The ‘should’ in Transparency takes wide scope and so doesn’t tell us what to think about $p$ given that we think we lack justification for $p$ – after all, maybe we shouldn’t think we lack justification for $p$. But given that we should think we lack justification, it does follow from Transparency that we should not say ‘yes’ to the question whether $p$. That is assuming, anyhow, that we are not in an epistemically tragic situation where our epistemic ‘shoulds’ are jointly unsatisfiable.

Again, recall that the argument here is limited to ‘first-order’ beliefs – beliefs that are not about the basis of other beliefs.

Here’s another way to think of the matter. Which conditions on first-order knowledge is the possibility that we are debased plausibly inconsistent with? It seems to us absurd to claim that the scenario is inconsistent with anything other than propositional justification. Even supposing that inconsistency strikes the reader as implausible, it is surely less implausible than other potential inconsistency claims. We think it’s the debasing skeptic’s lone hope.

This article is the product of full and equal collaboration between its authors. For comments and discussion, we are grateful to Tomás Bogardus, J. Adam Carter, Stew Cohen, Juan Comasañã, Jonathan Schaffer, Alex Skiles, and several anonymous referees. We began work on this essay in June 2010 at Ike’s on Speedway Boulevard in Tucson, Arizona.

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