

# Radical Logical Skepticism: The Unprovability Paradox as Total Underminer of Professional Academic Analytic Philosophy

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## 1. Introduction

Professional academic Analytic philosophy is built on a central, unspoken promise: that through rigorous “methods”—be they formal logic, conceptual analysis, or scientific naturalism—it can provide a rational justification for our beliefs. We are told that while specific theories may fail, the *enterprise* of philosophical justification remains sound.

In this essay, we argue that this premise is false. It’s false, not because analytic philosophers aren’t “smart enough,” but because the very concept of Global Justification is a logical impossibility.

More specifically, we argue that once justification is totalized—quantified over *all possible methods*—rational justification becomes structurally incoherent. Using a strengthened semantic paradox involving universal provability, we show that no restriction strategy (formalization, hierarchy, contextualism, or pragmatic retreat) escapes collapse without circularity. The result is not classical skepticism, but the impossibility of non-paradoxical ultimate justification as such. Mathematics, logic,

science, and philosophy survive only as locally coherent practices without ultimate epistemic grounding. And from the position of *epistemic humility*, that is just fine, because they do not need it to serve their main tasks of aiding human survival. Metaphysics survives as well, since supplying images of reality that aim to make sense of the buzzing confusion of the world through the construction of metaphysical systems (created by, for example, Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and so-on), is necessary for guiding humanity, as well as being edifying constructions supplying meaning and purpose (if any) to the human condition; but that is a story for another time.

## 2. Skepticism about Global Justification

Skeptical arguments traditionally target particular methods of justification: perception, induction, inference, testimony, memory. The classical skeptic suspends judgment due to equipollence of opposing arguments (Sextus Empiricus 1994). Cartesian skepticism doubts particular sources of belief. Agrippan skepticism invokes infinite regress, circularity, or dogmatism. More recent work typically appeals either to incompleteness (Gödel, 1931) or to underdetermination (Quine 1969).

All such approaches presuppose the coherence of justification itself. They attack the *contents* of epistemic claims, not the possibility of epistemic grounding as such.

In this essay we argue for a stronger result: justification in general collapses structurally once it is totalized. The problem is not that particular methods fail, but that the very concept of *global justification* becomes incoherent when self-reference over “any method whatsoever” is permitted.

The argument turns on a single sentence.

## 3. The Unprovability Paradox

Consider:

S: “This sentence is unprovable by any method whatsoever.”

Here “method” is maximally inclusive: formal proof, informal reasoning, perception, induction, computation, testimony, intuition, divine revelation, alien superintelligence—anything that could plausibly count as a way of establishing truth or justification.

Now reason:

1. Suppose **S** is provable by some method.
2. Then what **S** asserts is true—namely, that it is unprovable by any method.
3. Hence **S** is unprovable. Contradiction. Therefore, **S** is not provable.

But that conclusion—that **S** is unprovable—is exactly what **S** asserts. Hence: We have proven that **S** is unprovable.

4. Therefore, **S** is provable. Contradiction.

The paradox does not depend on any particular formal system. It does not invoke arithmetic, syntax, recursion theory, or Gödel coding. It arises purely from the interaction of self-reference and universal quantification over methods of proof or justification.

Unlike the classical liar sentence (“This sentence is false”), which concerns truth, **S** concerns *provability*. It therefore targets epistemology rather than semantics.

## 4. Why No Restriction Strategy Works

One might attempt to evade the paradox by restricting either (i) self-reference, (ii) admissible methods, or (iii) the level at which provability claims may be made. None succeeds.

### 4.1 Banning Self-Reference

One may declare sentences like **S** illegitimate. But this requires a method for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate sentences: a meta-method whose authority itself must be justified. Once justification is totalized, that meta-method falls under the same paradox.

This mirrors Tarski’s response to the liar paradox via object-language/meta-language hierarchies (Tarski, 1936). But the hierarchy itself must be justified. Once justification is demanded for the hierarchy, the regress remains.

### 4.2 Restricting “Provability”

One might restrict “provability” to formal derivability within specific legitimate systems. But then we can construct:

**S**: “This sentence is not provable in any specific legitimate system.”

What justifies the legitimacy criteria? Any answer invokes a meta-method, which re-enters the same domain. Gödel's incompleteness theorems already show that sufficiently expressive systems cannot prove their own consistency (Gödel, 1931). The present paradox is stronger: it shows that *no coherent notion of global provability is available at all*, formal or informal, once universalization is allowed.

### **4.3 Contextualism and Pragmatism**

One might retreat to contextualist or pragmatic accounts of justification (Wittgenstein, 1969; Brandom, 1994). But such accounts still rely on methods for determining which contexts or practices are authoritative. Those meta-methods again fall under "any method whatsoever." Contextualization does not dissolve the paradox; it merely relocates it.

### **4.4 Hierarchies of Languages**

Tarski-style hierarchies avoid semantic paradox by preventing truth predicates from applying to their own language. But the present paradox concerns justification, not truth, and applies equally to the hierarchy itself. The hierarchy must be justified, and that justificatory method cannot escape totalization.

## **5. The Collapse of Justification as Such**

If the paradox holds, then no statement is provably true in any absolute sense—not merely in formal systems, but under any conceivable method whatsoever.

The consequences are devastating and sweeping.

### **5.1 Mathematics**

Mathematical theorems may be derivable relative to axioms and rules, but the justification of those axioms, rules, and inferential practices cannot be globally secured. Mathematics becomes a locally coherent formal practice—elegant, powerful, and useful—but without ultimate epistemic grounding (Gödel, 1931; Wildberger 2005).

### **5.2 Logic**

Logical laws—for example, non-contradiction, excluded middle, modus ponens—rely on inferential practices whose global justification cannot be non-circularly established. Logic persists as a cognitive practice or practical tool, not as a system of necessary truths immune to skeptical destabilization.

### 5.3 Science

Scientific methods—induction, falsification, Bayesian inference—are methods among others. Their reliability cannot be justified without invoking further methods, which themselves fall under the paradox. Science remains instrumentally successful, but epistemically ungrounded in any ultimate sense (Quine, 1969; van Fraassen, 1980).

### 5.4 Philosophy

Philosophical theories of knowledge, truth, meaning, or rationality presuppose the coherence of justification. But justification itself is precisely what collapses under totalization. Philosophy thus loses not merely particular doctrines, but its justificatory footing altogether.

## 6. Why This is Stronger than Classical Skepticism

Classical Pyrrhonism suspends judgment due to the equipollence of arguments for and against any proposition (Sextus, Empiricus 1994). Cartesian skepticism doubts particular sources of belief. Agrippan skepticism invokes infinite regress, circularity, or dogmatism.

The present result is stronger. It does not merely show that justification fails *in practice* or *in particular domains*. It shows that justification fails *in principle* once universalised. The collapse arises not from empirical limitations, cognitive weakness, or lack of evidence, but from structural paradox.

This is not the claim that “nothing is provable,” which would itself require proof and thereby collapse into self-refutation. Rather, it is the claim that *the concept of global provability is incoherent*. The paradox infects every attempt at proof, including attempts to prove skepticism itself.

## 7. The Only Coherent Skeptical Posture

The radical skeptic cannot coherently assert:

- “Nothing is provable.”
- “We should believe nothing.”
- “S is true.”
- “S proves skepticism.”

Each of these claims would require justification and thus fall prey to the same paradox. The only consistent stance is not doctrinal but performative:

Refuse to assert any proposition as ultimately justified.

- Treat all reasoning as local, provisional, and instrumentally useful.
- Accept that discourse continues — mathematical, scientific, practical — but without ultimate epistemic grounding.

This is not quietism, pragmatism, or relativism. It is the recognition that *justification itself collapses under totalization*. One does not solve the paradox; one inhabits it.

## 8. Consequences for Truth and Knowledge

If global justification is incoherent, then truth independent of proof becomes epistemically inert. The concept of “truth” may still function within practices, but cannot be accessed or warranted in any ultimate sense. Knowledge becomes, at best, stable belief within constrained practices, not justified true belief in any absolute sense.

This is not nihilism. It is structural deflation: the collapse not of meaning or practice, but of ultimate epistemic authority.

## 9. Objections and Replies

*Objection 1: The Sentence S is Illegitimate or Meaningless*

One might object that **S**—“This sentence is unprovable by any method whatsoever”—is illegitimate, ill-formed, or meaningless, and therefore unfit to ground philosophical conclusions.

*Reply:*

Declaring **S** illegitimate requires a method for determining which sentences are admissible. That meta-method must itself be justified. Once justification is totalized, the meta-method falls under the same paradox. Any attempt to exclude **S** therefore presupposes precisely the global justificatory authority whose coherence is at issue. Moreover, **S** is grammatically well-formed, semantically intelligible, and structurally no more pathological than familiar self-referential constructions used throughout logic and philosophy (Gödel, 1931; Tarski, 1936). The burden lies with the objector to

explain—non-circularly—why this sentence is illegitimate while others are not. No such explanation can succeed.

*Objection 2: The Paradox Arises Only Because of Illicit Totalization*

The paradox, it is claimed, arises only because justification is illegitimately totalized over “any method whatsoever.” Legitimate epistemic practice is local or contextual and therefore immune.

*Reply:*

This objection presupposes a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate totalization. But that distinction itself requires justification. The method by which one determines that global justification is illegitimate must itself be a justificatory method—and thus falls under “any method whatsoever.” If justification cannot be totalized, that fact itself must be justifiable. But no such justification can escape the paradox without circularity. The objection therefore fails at the meta-level.

*Objection 3: The Argument Equivocates about “Provability”*

Perhaps “provability” equivocates between formal derivability, informal justification, pragmatic warrant, and other epistemic notions. Once these are disambiguated, the paradox dissolves.

*Reply:*

The argument does not rely on equivocation. On the contrary, it exploits universalization. “Provability” is stipulated to range over *any* method whatsoever—formal, informal, pragmatic, psychological, or otherwise. For any restricted notion of provability, a corresponding sentence can be constructed:

“This sentence is unprovable by any legitimate notion of provability.”

The question then becomes: what justifies the legitimacy criteria? Any answer invokes a meta-method, which re-enters the same domain. Disambiguation relocates the paradox; it does not dissolve it.

*Objection 4: The Argument Presupposes Classical Logic*

Perhaps the paradox depends on classical logic, especially the law of non-contradiction. Paraconsistent or dialethic logics might tolerate the contradiction without collapse (Priest, 2006).

*Reply:*

Even if contradictions are tolerated, the problem remains. For if **S** is both provable and unprovable, then no method can non-arbitrarily classify it as justified or unjustified. The collapse concerns not consistency but *justificatory authority*. A system that allows contradictions still requires a method for determining which contradictions are acceptable and which inferences to draw—and that meta-method again falls under “any method whatsoever.” Dialetheism changes the shape of the wreckage but does not prevent the crash.

*Objection 5: The Argument Undermines Itself*

If the argument is sound, then it undermines itself, since it purports to justify skepticism about justification. Therefore, it is self-refuting.

*Reply:*

The argument does not assert that skepticism is true or justified. It asserts that *justification itself collapses under totalization*. That claim is not offered as a justified theorem but as a paradoxical demonstration that infects all justificatory claims, including itself. This is not self-refutation, but reflexivity. The argument does not exempt itself from its own conclusion; it exemplifies it. The charge of self-refutation presupposes a standard of coherence that the argument precisely denies can be globally secured.

*Objection 6: Science and Mathematics Clearly Work*

Planes fly, bridges stand, predictions succeed. Therefore, justification cannot have collapsed.

*Reply:*

The argument does not deny the effectiveness of reasoning practices. It denies their *ultimate* epistemic grounding. Local success does not entail global justification. Instrumental reliability does not constitute non-circular warrant. A calculator that outputs correct answers does not thereby justify arithmetic; it presupposes it. The paradox leaves intact the practical utility of reasoning while dissolving its claim to *ultimate* rational authority.

*Objection 7: The Paradox is Merely Linguistic*

Perhaps **S** exploits quirks of language rather than revealing anything substantive about knowledge or justification.

*Reply:*

Semantic paradoxes have long been recognised as revealing structural limits on formal systems (Gödel, 1931; Tarski, 1936). The present paradox concerns not truth predicates but justificatory predicates—what counts as proof or warrant. Its implications are therefore epistemological rather than merely linguistic. If language cannot coherently express global justification, that itself reveals a structural limitation on the concept of justification.

*Objection 8: Epistemology Can Simply Avoid Global Claims*

Perhaps epistemology should simply abandon global claims and restrict itself to local, practice-relative accounts of justification.

*Reply:*

This prescription is itself a global epistemic claim about what epistemology ought to do. It therefore presupposes a justificatory standard governing epistemology as such — precisely what the argument shows cannot be coherently grounded. Epistemology cannot legislate its own limits without invoking the very authority it seeks to renounce.

## **10. Final Assessment**

No objection succeeds because each presupposes some method of justification whose legitimacy must itself be justified. Once justification is totalized, all such meta-methods fall under the same paradox.

The conclusion is not that skepticism is true, but that *truth, justification, and proof cannot be globally secured at all*. The paradox does not defeat epistemology; it reveals that epistemology's *foundational* ambition is incoherent.

The only coherent stance is not doctrinal but practical: continue reasoning locally while abandoning the demand for ultimate justification. Justification eats its own tail.

Professional academic Analytic philosophy, exemplified by the practices of Anglo-American-Australian philosophy departments and professional journals (e.g., *Analysis*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Journal of Philosophy*, *Mind*, etc.) which presents itself as the ultimate arbiter of truth and method, is exposed as a hollow exercise. It is an industry dedicated to providing “justifications” for things that are, at their core, unjustifiable. Many students who do philosophy for a year to fill out

electives, come away feeling this; that the entire discipline is pointless, due to its minute, Scholastic logic-chopping. They never go on to read the great works of authentic philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Spinoza, Fichte, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and so-on.

Philosophy does not need more “rigorous” methods; it needs the *epistemic humility* to admit that the quest for a totalized rational foundation ended the moment we learned to speak in self-referential sentences. The ivory tower isn’t just leaning; its foundations were never there to begin with.

## Appendix A: Formalization and Structural Features of the Paradox

### A1. Abstract Schema

Let:

- $J(x)$  = “ $x$  is justified (provable) by some method”
- $M$  = the class of all methods whatsoever

Define sentence  $S$  as:

$$S \equiv \neg \exists m \in M (m \text{ justifies } S)$$

Now reason:

1. Suppose  $\exists m \in M$  such that  $m$  justifies  $S$ .
2. Then  $J(S)$  holds, so  $S$  is true.
3. But  $S$  asserts  $\neg \exists m \in M (m \text{ justifies } S)$ . Contradiction.

Hence:

4.  $\neg \exists m \in M (m \text{ justifies } S)$ .

But step (4) is itself a justification of  $S$ .

5. Hence  $\exists m \in M (m \text{ justifies } S)$ . Contradiction.

This derivation does not depend on classical logic beyond minimal inference principles and does not assume bivalence or excluded middle. The contradiction arises

purely from the interaction of self-reference and universal quantification over justificatory methods.

## A2. Distinction from Gödelian Incompleteness

Gödel constructs, relative to a formal system  $F$ , a sentence  $G_F$  asserting its own unprovability *in F* (Gödel, 1931). The conclusion is system-relative incompleteness. By contrast,  $S$  asserts its unprovability relative to *all possible methods whatsoever*. The result is not incompleteness but incoherence: no notion of global provability can be coherently sustained.

Gödel shows:

No sufficiently expressive system can prove all truths.

The present argument shows:

No coherent notion of “provability as such” exists once totalized.

## A3. Why Hierarchies Fail

Suppose we attempt to block the paradox by introducing levels:

- Level 0: object-language proofs
- Level 1: meta-proofs
- Level 2: meta-meta-proofs
- ...

Then  $S$  may be reformulated as:

“This sentence is not provable at any level.”

The question then becomes: what justifies the hierarchy itself, or the claim that justification must occur at some finite or transfinite level? Any such justification appeals to a meta-method not contained in the hierarchy, which reintroduces totalization and thus the paradox.

Hierarchies therefore do not resolve the problem; they merely defer it.

## A4. Relation to Dialetheism

If contradictions are tolerated, one might accept both  $J(S)$  and  $\neg J(S)$ . But this does not restore justificatory authority. For the question becomes: what justifies accepting this

contradiction rather than rejecting it, or treating it as trivialising? Any such decision requires a meta-method of justification, which again falls under “any method whatsoever.”

Thus, dialetheism avoids explosion but not epistemic collapse.

#### **A5. Structural Moral**

The paradox does not arise from language pathology, classical logic, or formal limitations. It arises from the attempt to *totalize justification itself*. The moment justification is universalized—quantified over all methods—it becomes inconsistent. This is not a contingent failure of particular epistemic systems, but a structural feature of justification as such.

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