

Pyrrhonian Skepticism

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Introduction to Pyrrhonian Skepticism

Recently as well as traditionally, skepticism has posed one of the central challenges in epistemology. Externalists and contextualists, as well as good old-fashioned foundationalists and coherentists, often present their theories as reactions to skepticism. A few philosophers have even defended skepticism, at least in part.

This discussion has focused largely on one particular variety of skepticism. This version is often called Cartesian skepticism, although it was not held by Descartes (who attacked it). So-called Cartesian skepticism is usually defined as a claim that nobody knows anything, at least about a large area (such as the external world). Opponents respond by arguing that this skeptical claim is incoherent or unjustified or false or true only in esoteric contexts.

When these opponents attack skepticism, their definitions show that they are concerned solely with Cartesian skepticism. A foundationalist, Robert Audi, defines knowledge skepticism “as the view that there is little if any knowledge.”¹ A coherentist, Keith Lehrer, writes, “The deepest form [of skepticism] denies that we know anything at all.”² An externalist, Robert Nozick, says, “The skeptic argues that we do not know what we think we do.”³ And a contextualist, Keith DeRose, asserts, “One of the most popular skeptical claims is that the targeted beliefs *aren’t known* to be true.”⁴ These definitions differ in detail, and these authors distinguish many kinds of skepticism, but they still share the assumption that skepticism should be defined by some claim concerning the

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impossibility of knowledge. It is that claim that they oppose and try to refute or soften.

Strangely, this debate rages about a claim that almost nobody makes. A few brave souls, such as a young Lehrer and Peter Unger,⁵ have argued that nobody knows anything, but even they fairly quickly gave up their Cartesian skepticism.⁶ Some philosophers do claim that we lack all knowledge in large fields, such as religion, morality, or the future, but Cartesian skepticism is more general. So those who work hard to refute Cartesian skepticism are attacking an empty castle. Their attempts can still be worthwhile, since many of us are at times (while students?) tempted by Cartesian skepticism, and it can be illuminating to specify what is problematic about Cartesian skepticism. Nonetheless, it seems at least as useful to consider positions that are actually held.

After ancient times, the only actual skeptical tradition has been Pyrrhonian. Montaigne, Hume, and Wittgenstein can be interpreted as representatives of this tradition.⁷ This tradition has been revived and extended recently in a major work by Robert Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*,⁸ which has spawned many lively debates.⁹ Like Sextus Empiricus,¹⁰ who championed Pyrrhonian skepticism in the ancient world, Fogelin does not claim that nobody knows anything. So Pyrrhonians are not Cartesian skeptics. But they also do not deny Cartesian skepticism. Instead, the doubt of Pyrrhonians is so deep that they suspend belief about both Cartesian skepticism and its denial. Nonetheless, some Pyrrhonians, including Fogelin, argue that they can still hold “common beliefs of everyday life” and can even claim to know some truths in an everyday way. By distancing themselves from Cartesian skeptics in these (and other) ways, Pyrrhonian skeptics hope to avoid many of the criticisms that trouble Cartesian skeptics.

It remains to be seen whether Pyrrhonian skepticism will be undermined by problems of its own. This volume is intended to investigate that issue. The first part, which includes five essays, explores the historical background that informs our understanding of Pyrrhonian skepticism. The second part then looks at objections to Pyrrhonian skepticism and its relation to other alternatives on the contemporary scene.

Gisela Striker opens by contrasting the ancient Pyrrhonists’ stance with Fogelin’s neo-Pyrrhonism. She argues that unlike other skeptics, ancient and modern, the ancient Pyrrhonists did not decide to suspend judgment on epistemological grounds. Rather, they claimed to have found themselves unable to arrive at any judgment at the end of their attempts to settle the many conflicts of appearances and opinions that surrounded

them. However, by giving up the attempt, they also claimed to have unexpectedly reached the aim of their investigations: tranquility. Faced with the objection that total suspension of judgment is humanly impossible because it would leave one unable to act, they responded that they were following the customs of ordinary life, passively going along with beliefs they found themselves having, but without ever claiming to have found the truth. It is this detachment from their own beliefs, according to Striker, that allegedly allowed the Pyrrhonist to keep his peace of mind without any major disturbances. Striker concludes that this antirational attitude is not likely to be typical of ordinary people, nor would it seem desirable to modern defenders of ordinary practices like Fogelin.

Janet Broughton widens the discussion by introducing Descartes in contrast with three skeptical figures. The Doubting Pyrrhonist gives up all claims to knowledge after recognizing that any knowledge claim can be challenged with an unending supply of eliminable but uneliminated defeaters. The Agrippan Pyrrhonist holds on to the conviction that we have knowledge but finds that we cannot back up this conviction with rationalizing evidence or a general theory of justification. The Cartesian Skeptic is committed to a general theory of justification, which says that all grounds must be contents of the believer's mind, and which leads to the conclusion that most of our beliefs are unjustified. Broughton argues that the meditator in Descartes' *Meditations* is different from all three of these skeptics. Unlike the Cartesian Skeptic, Descartes' meditator does not assume that all grounds must be contents of the believer's mind. Unlike the Doubting Pyrrhonist, the meditator raises doubts by using global defeaters. And unlike the Agrippan Skeptic, the meditator uses "dependence arguments" that are supposed to avoid the Agrippan modes of regress, circularity, and arbitrariness. Seeing the distinctive character of the meditator helps us understand how Descartes could have hoped to meet the challenge of skepticism.

Descartes' rationalist response to skepticism is often contrasted with empiricist responses to skepticism. Berkeley is a standard example, but Ken Winkler's essay challenges this common interpretation of Berkeley. Although Berkeley never explicitly refers to Pyrrhonian skepticism, Winkler shows how Berkeley's idealism is partially motivated by a need to overcome the mode of relativity, which had been pressed by Pyrrhonists. Berkeley's solution to relativity is close to that of Protagoras as presented in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Sextus says that Protagoras "is thought to have something in common with the Pyrrhonists." Nonetheless, Berkeley is no Pyrrhonist. He tries hard to distance himself from Pyrrhonism and other

forms of skepticism. Still, Berkeley's own position seems to be affected by the Pyrrhonists' uses of the mode of relativity. Berkeley also illustrates how far one must go to avoid skeptical conclusions once one admits relativity. Winkler argues that Berkeley needed to depend on reason—intuition or demonstration—in order to avoid skepticism, so Berkeley turns out to be closer to the rationalist tradition than is usually recognized. This aspect of Winkler's interpretation should stimulate not only Berkeley scholars but also anyone who thinks that empiricists have an adequate solution to the Pyrrhonian mode of relativity.

One philosopher who definitely is an empiricist is David Hume, the subject of Don Garrett's essay. To determine the ways in which Hume was and was not a skeptic, Garrett distinguishes varieties of skepticism along six dimensions. He argues that Hume is unmitigated in his rational support of skepticism and in his prescriptive skepticism about certain "high and distant enquiries" but mitigated in his general practicing skepticism and in his general epistemic merit skepticism. Hume's skepticism must be seen as mitigated in these respects, according to Garrett, in order to solve four puzzles for Hume scholars and, more particularly, to understand Hume's endorsement of the title principle, according to which reason "ought to be assented to" when it "is lively and mixes itself with some propensity" to belief. Hume scholars who see Hume's skepticism as less mitigated will be challenged by Garrett's evidence. Contemporary epistemologists will also learn from Garrett's precise framework for classifying skeptics, which shows how even a mitigated skepticism can contain "a small tincture of Pyrrhonism."

Skipping a few centuries, Hans Sluga locates Ludwig Wittgenstein within the Pyrrhonian tradition. Sluga explains some ways in which Wittgenstein was more Pyrrhonian, even in his early *Tractatus*, than is usually recognized. Sluga traces the roots of Wittgenstein's Pyrrhonism to a surprising source, Fritz Mauthner, a now-obscure philosopher and theater critic of the early twentieth century who lived in Prague, Vienna, and Berlin. Wittgenstein's later views moved even closer to those of Mauthner, although Wittgenstein never became as thoroughgoing a Pyrrhonian as Mauthner had been. Despite their remaining differences, Mauthner's neo-Pyrrhonian view of language was, according to Sluga, "responsible for the linguistic turn in Wittgenstein's thinking and thereby indirectly also for the whole linguistic turn in twentieth-century analytic philosophy."

After this tour through the history of Pyrrhonism, part II begins with comparisons between Pyrrhonism and its main contemporary competitors. Michael Williams first claims that the Pyrrhonian regress argument

presupposes a “Prior Grounding” conception of justification. Williams contrasts this with a “Default and Challenge” structure, which leads to a contextualist picture of justification. This contextualist picture differs from both foundationalism and coherentism, which he sees as “overreactions” to the Pyrrhonian challenge. Contextualism is said to “incorporate the best features of its traditionalist rivals” and also to avoid skepticism by insisting on an explanation of how our grounds might be mistaken and why they need to be defended. In the end, Williams argues that we should not ask whether the Prior Grounding or the Default and Challenge conception is really true. Instead, we should give up epistemological realism because it encourages skepticism, which makes it “hard to square with ordinary justificational practices.”

Next Ernest Sosa, a prominent externalist, lays out the rationale for two fundamental principles—*ascent* and *closure*—and shows how they imply further principles of *exclusion* and of the *criterion*. Such principles lead both to the “Pyrrhonian Problematic,” which foundationalism and coherentism attempt to solve, and also to the clash of intuitions between internalists and externalists. Sosa suggests that the kind of knowledge that externalists and foundationalists claim should be distinguished from the kind of knowledge that internalists and coherentists claim, and which Pyrrhonists doubt. Sosa traces this distinction between kinds of knowledge back to Descartes’ distinction between *cognitio*, which requires reliability but not a reflective perspective, and *scientia*, which requires both reliability and reflection. If Sosa is correct, then externalism and internalism might both be correct but about different topics. Pyrrhonism might even turn out to be compatible with externalism, if all that Pyrrhonists deny is *scientia*. This would not be the first time that a philosophical debate gets resolved by distinguishing the subject matters of apparently conflicting views.

Robert Fogelin also tries to reconcile Pyrrhonism with supposed competitors, but in a different way. Fogelin explains his own Pyrrhonian skepticism in contrast to Cartesian skepticism, then turns to externalism and contextualism, which he did not discuss in detail in his book but which have become popular recently. Fogelin argues that although externalists and contextualists often present themselves as opponents of skepticism, what they oppose is Cartesian skepticism. They actually back themselves into a Pyrrhonist position, according to Fogelin, because externalists give up the search for reasons for belief and contextualists (exemplified by Keith DeRose) admit that believers have no reasons for their beliefs within epistemological contexts, which is whenever skepticism is at issue. These arguments show how hard it is to avoid Pyrrhonian skepticism.

Neo-Pyrrhonism still faces problems, as Barry Stroud argues. Stroud explains Fogelin's Pyrrhonism in sympathetic terms but then suggests that Fogelin gives up on Pyrrhonism at crucial points. In particular, Fogelin claims that when he and others reflect on how we disregard uneliminated but eliminable defeaters while making knowledge-claims in everyday life, our level of scrutiny rises and we are inclined to give up those claims to know. Stroud explains why a Pyrrhonist should resist this inclination and retain everyday knowledge-claims. Part of Stroud's strategy is to argue that the possibilities Fogelin classifies as "uneliminated but eliminable defeaters" are actually eliminated by everyday evidence that we possess. As a result, Pyrrhonism is supposed to depend on other defeaters that are uneliminable and which do not raise the level of scrutiny or undermine everyday knowledge claims as readily as Fogelin might seem to think.

The relation between everyday knowledge-claims and Pyrrhonian skepticism is also a main topic in my contribution. I invoke a technical framework of contrast classes within which Pyrrhonians can accept (or deny) knowledge-claims that are relativized to specific contrast classes but avoid all unrelativized knowledge-claims and all presuppositions about which contrast classes are really relevant. Pyrrhonians can then assert part of the content of everyday knowledge-claims without privileging the everyday perspective or any other perspective. This framework thus provides a precise way to understand the central claims of neo-Pyrrhonism while avoiding most, if not all, of the problems and objections raised by its critics.

Roy Sorensen closes the volume with a wide-ranging and amusing exploration of many uses of ignorance. Sorensen's serious point is that we are more vulnerable to pessimists than to skeptics per se. When knowledge is unwelcome, we have an uphill struggle to defend our protestations of ignorance. According to Sorensen, Pyrrhonian skeptics, including Fogelin, are conditional skeptics and, hence, not really skeptics at all. Moreover, Sorensen argues, conditional skeptics refute themselves, for when they assert conditionals, they make assertions. Since these conditionals are philosophical in content, Pyrrhonians do not avoid all philosophical assertions, as they claim.

Whether or not these objections can be met, these essays together provide ample material for understanding and assessing Pyrrhonian skepticism both as a historical movement and as a contemporary alternative in epistemology. This collection should thus be useful in classes on skepticism, for epistemologists who want to broaden their view of skepticism, and to philosophers who are already studying the Pyrrhonian

tradition. These investigations will help us understand not only skepticism as it is actually practiced but also knowledge of the kind that we might hope to have. The contributors as a group reveal the diversity, liveliness, and pertinacity of the Pyrrhonian skeptical tradition, while also contributing to the ongoing Pyrrhonian project.

Notes

1. Robert Audi, *Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 284.
2. Keith Lehrer, *Theory of Knowledge* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1990), 176.
3. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 167.
4. Keith DeRose, "Introduction: Responding to Skepticism," in *Skepticism*, ed. K. DeRose and T. Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2. Perhaps here is the place to confess that I myself committed the mistake of defining skepticism as such a claim in "Moral Skepticism and Justification," in *Moral Knowledge?*, ed. W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M. Timmons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.
5. Keith Lehrer, "Why Not Skepticism?" *Philosophical Forum* 2.3 (1971): 283–98; Peter Unger, "A Defense of Skepticism," *Philosophical Review* 80 (1971): 198–218.
6. See Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); and Peter Unger, *Philosophical Relativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
7. Interpretations of Hume and Wittgenstein as Pyrrhonian skeptics are developed by Robert Fogelin in *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (Boston: Routledge, 1985) and *Wittgenstein* (Boston: Routledge, 1976, 1987). See also Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).
8. Robert J. Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
9. See *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62.2 (1997), *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 7.22 (1999), and *Philosophical Issues* 10 (2000).
10. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

The Skeptics Are Coming! The Skeptics Are Coming!

Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it.

—David Hume, *Abstract*

When contemporary epistemologists refer to the skeptic, almost without exception—I'm an exception—the kind of skeptic they have in mind is a cartesian skeptic: that is, a promoter of skeptical arguments based on skeptical scenarios of the kind found in Descartes' *First Meditation*. (Since Descartes was not himself a skeptic, I spell "cartesian" with a lowercase "c.") Pyrrhonian skepticism, which predates cartesian skepticism by two millennia, gets, by comparison, little attention. This neglect of Pyrrhonian skepticism is illustrated by a recent anthology by DeRose and Warfield entitled *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*,¹ whose index contains only two references to Sextus Empiricus. (The index entry reads "Empiricus, Sextus," apparently on the assumption that "Empiricus" was Sextus's last name. This is reminiscent of C. D. Broad's index entry that read "Christ, J.")² Checking the text, we find that one of the references is a footnote in a piece by Robert Nozick, where Empiricus (him again) is referred to as one member in a long list of writers who have contributed to "the immense literature concerning skepticism." What Sextus's contribution might have been is not indicated. The other reference to Sextus is nothing more than a remark made in passing which, in very short compass, manages to get Sextus's position dead wrong. (Identifying this writer will be worth a footnote later on.)

Elsewhere I have reflected on the following question: What would happen if a traditional Pyrrhonist were allowed to participate in a three-way

discussion with foundationalists and coherentists? My conclusion was that the Pyrrhonist would win. Hands down. No contest. Or so it seems. Both the foundationalists and the coherentists undertook the task of showing that some suitably large and important region of our knowledge claims is capable of validation. They both thought that these knowledge claims could be defended by presenting *reasons* establishing their legitimacy. If that is what theory of knowledge is supposed to do, then, as it seems to me, the five Agrippan modes involving discrepancy, infinite regress, relativity, hypothesis (or arbitrary assumption), and circularity show that this cannot be done.³

But many of our New Epistemologists—I'll call them that—have foresworn this large-scale attempt at validation through reason-giving, either by severing the connection between knowledge and reason-giving altogether or by dispersing reason-giving into a plurality of procedures, giving no preeminence to one procedure over all others. Severing the connection with reason-giving is the way of externalism (early Alvin Goldman); dispersing reason-giving is the way of contextualism (perhaps the very late Wittgenstein). Hybrid theories employ both strategies, combining them in various proportions (Michael Williams, David Lewis, and Ernie Sosa). How, I now want to ask, would the Pyrrhonian deal with these New Epistemologists? You will have to wait for an answer. First I want to say some things about Pyrrhonian skepticism, contrasting it with cartesian skepticism. I also want to say a few things about what I call Neo-Pyrrhonism.

A central difference between cartesian skepticism and traditional Pyrrhonian skepticism is that cartesian skepticism, but not Pyrrhonian skepticism, deals in strong negative epistemic evaluations. For example, taking claims to perceptual knowledge as their target, cartesian skeptics typically present arguments purporting to show that perception cannot provide us with knowledge of the external world. The Pyrrhonian skeptic makes no such claim. Instances of perceptual variability—from one animal to another, from one person to another, from one perspective to another, from one physiological state to another, etc.—can be used to challenge empirical claims made from a particular perspective. Why, it can be asked, should we give this perspective a privileged status? But even if no suitable answer is forthcoming to this question, this does not show that empirical knowledge is impossible. Reaching this negative conclusion would depend on establishing a strong claim to the effect that no perceptual perspective is epistemically privileged. No Pyrrhonian who knows his business would accept the burden of establishing such a claim. Pyrrhonian skeptics are adept at avoiding burdens of proof. Since they are not out to prove that knowledge is impossible, they have no burden of proof

to bear. For Pyrrhonian skeptics, the claim that a certain kind of knowledge is impossible amounts to a form of negative dogmatism: a charge they brought against their ancient rivals, the Academic Skeptics. If time travel existed, they would bring it against cartesian skeptics as well.⁴

Another difference between the cartesian and the Pyrrhonian skeptic is that the cartesian skeptic, but not the Pyrrhonian skeptic, raises doubts that call into question our most common beliefs about the world around us. If I am no more than a brain in a vat on a planet circling Alpha Centauri, so wired that all I seem to see around me is nothing but a dream induced in me by a malicious demon, then I do not know—as I think I know—that I am writing this essay on the bosky shores of Partridge Lake. For the cartesian skeptic, if an adequate response to this challenge is not forthcoming, I am then obliged to reject even my most common, ordinary claims to knowledge. In contrast—though this is a disputed point—the Pyrrhonian skeptic does not target common, everyday beliefs for skeptical assault. The primary target of Pyrrhonian skepticism is dogmatic philosophy—with secondary sallies into other fields where similar dogmatizing is found. The attacks of the Pyrrhonian skeptic are directed against the dogmas of “Professors”—not the beliefs of common people pursuing the honest (or, for that matter, not so honest) business of daily life. The Pyrrhonian skeptic leaves common beliefs, unpretentiously held, alone.

I should acknowledge that this account of Pyrrhonian skepticism—in particular, the claim that it leaves common belief undisturbed—has been the subject of sharp controversy in the recent literature on Pyrrhonism. Borrowing the distinction from Galen, Jonathan Barnes contrasts two ways of interpreting late Pyrrhonist texts: as either *rustic* or *urbane*. Treated as rustic, the Pyrrhonist is pictured as setting aside subtlety and flatfootedly seeking suspension of belief on all matters whatsoever, including the practical beliefs concerning everyday life. This is the interpretation adopted by Jonathan Barnes, Miles Burnyeat, and a number of other distinguished Brits.⁵ The rustic interpretation does have the charm of giving Pyrrhonian skepticism some of the zip of cartesian skepticism, and for this reason, I suppose, makes it seem more arresting. On the other side, it also opens the Pyrrhonian skeptic to the charge made by Burnyeat (and Hume before him) that Pyrrhonian skepticism, genuinely embraced, is unlivable, perhaps suicidal. If so, the professed Pyrrhonist can survive only by living in epistemic bad faith. Since, following Michael Frede,⁶ I adopt the urbane interpretation of the text, this choice does not come up. So when I speak of Pyrrhonism, I mean Pyrrhonism urbanely understood. When I speak of neo-Pyrrhonism, I have in mind classical Pyrrhonism, urbanely

understood, updated, where necessary, to make it applicable to contemporary philosophical debates.

I am inclined to think that the ancient Pyrrhonists were trying to show (or exhibit) more than that the dogmatists' epistemological programs fail on their own terms. Beyond this, they were, I think, trying to show that pursuing such a program actually generates a radical skepticism rather than avoids it. I confess that I have found no text in the writings of Sextus that says just this, though Sextus, I am sure, would be pleased with this further critique of epistemic dogmatism. Hume, whom I take to be an urbane Pyrrhonian, explicitly makes this move in the *Treatise* when he tells us: "It is impossible, upon any system, to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them further when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it always encreases the further we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it."⁷ Since Hume held a rustic interpretation of ancient Pyrrhonism, he distanced himself from it in these words: "But a Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence."⁸ Taking it as rustic, Hume recommends a philosophical tonic containing "only a small tincture of Pyrrhonism."⁹ If he had interpreted Pyrrhonism as urbane, he could have counseled a full quaff of the real stuff.

The notion that "sceptical doubt arises naturally from profound and intense reflection" finds a parallel expression in Wittgenstein, who, by my lights, is another urbane Pyrrhonian. These passages come from *On Certainty*: "481. When one hears Moore say, 'I know that that's a tree,' one suddenly understands those who think that that has by no means been settled. The matter strikes one all at once as being unclear and blurred. It is as if Moore had put it in the wrong light. . . . 482. It is as if 'I know' did not tolerate a metaphysical emphasis."¹⁰ The suggestion here is that the epistemological enterprise, when relentlessly pursued, not only fails in its efforts, but also, Samson-like, brings down the entire edifice of knowledge around it. David Lewis, in his "Elusive Knowledge," recognizes this threat—though he thinks that shoring it up is possible.¹¹ I make a fuss over it in

Pyrrhonian Reflections—unlike Lewis, the situation strikes me as hopeless. I am inclined to think that this doctrine is at least implicit in the writings of ancient Pyrrhonists. But however matters stand with the traditional Pyrrhonists, the Samson principle—I'll call it that—is a central tenet of neo-Pyrrhonism, a standpoint adopted at least by Hume, Wittgenstein, and me. (Here I engage in *catacosmesis*. For those not fully up to speed on rhetorical terms, *catacosmesis* involves the ordering of words from the greatest to the least in dignity: e.g., “For God, for country, and for Yale”).¹²

One final difference between cartesian skepticism and Pyrrhonian skepticism is that skeptical scenarios play a central role in cartesian skepticism but not in Pyrrhonian skepticism. Cartesian skeptics hold that we do not know something (that is, do not really know it) unless it is completely bulletproof against possible defeaters, however remote. Skeptical scenarios are introduced to show that, in principle, this standard cannot be met—at least for a particular class of knowledge-claims, typically those concerning perceptual knowledge of the external world. Since the Pyrrhonian will suspend judgment concerning the appropriateness of this criterion for knowledge, he will not play the cartesian game directly. More deeply, since he is not trying to establish strong negative epistemic judgments, the Pyrrhonian has no special need for skeptical scenarios. The Pyrrhonian can, however, take pleasure in the confusion that besets epistemologists in their efforts to respond to the challenges to knowledge raised by skeptical scenarios. So in the spirit of neo-Pyrrhonism, let's have some fun.

There seem to be two main options for replying to the challenges of skeptical scenarios. The first is to argue that skeptical scenarios are conceptually incoherent, and, for this reason, the challenges they present are lacking in meaning, contentless, otiose—or something like that. They are, it is sometimes said, pseudo-challenges. This is the transcendental (sometimes verificationist) response to skeptical scenarios. This response faces hard going. First, transcendental/verificationist arguments are often pretty fishy.¹³ Second, skeptical scenarios seem on their face to be perfectly intelligible; thus a heavy burden falls on anyone who wishes to persuade us otherwise.¹⁴ There is a deeper worry. Suppose, for whatever reason, we acknowledge that, if we are brains in vats, then our words may not mean what we think they mean, or perhaps may not mean anything at all. If that is right, then the skeptic's doubt—so the argument sometimes goes—undercuts the very expressability of his doubts. It is hard to see, however, how this threat of semantic (instead of epistemic) nihilism provides solace. Perhaps we just *are* brains in vats and so deeply fuddled semantically that

no sense attaches to the skeptical scenarios we formulate—or to anything else either. Standard cartesian doubt pales in comparison with the threat of semantic nihilism. But I won't ask you to peer into that abyss here.

On the assumption that skeptical scenarios are at least intelligible, what response can be made to them? More specifically, what responses do our New Epistemologists make to them? Externalism/reliabilism in its many forms represents one popular approach. If our beliefs stand in the right sort of relationship to the things they are about (for example, if they reliably track the truth—and perhaps track it in the right sort of way), then we know them to be true. The important point is that a relationship of this kind can hold even if the person possessing the knowledge is not in a position to produce adequate reasons that show this. So the cartesian skeptic's claim that, for example, we cannot know things on the basis of sensory evidence is met with the response, "For all we know we do know such things." Notice that this is all that is needed to refute the *cartesian* skeptic's strong claim that we *cannot* know.¹⁵ It has no tendency to refute Pyrrhonian skepticism, not even in its rustic form.

The contextualist line in its most straightforward form rests on the following idea: What you know or do not know is a function of the epistemic standards governing the context in which you are operating. For example, if the context is governed by cartesian standards, the possibility that one is a brain in a vat is a relevant defeater to the claim that you can, just by looking, come to know you have a hand. In contrast, in a non-epistemological setting you can usually make it known that you have a hand simply by making an appropriate Moorean gesture while at the same time saying, "Here is a hand."¹⁶ So, for the contextualist, if the context is rigidly epistemological, then you do not know that you have hands; if the context is ordinary, or in Thompson Clarke's lingo, "plain," then you do know this—or at least can.¹⁷ Moore's mistake was to make a plain response in a philosophical context. The skeptic's mistake is to demand a philosophical response in a plain context. Contextualist theories are usually more complex than this—they are often supplemented by an externalist component—but this gives the rough form that such theories take.

Our question now is this: How would a neo-Pyrrhonian, suitably briefed on these maneuvers, respond? As a way of approaching this question, we can imagine someone stumbling onto Descartes' *Meditations* and becoming sore perplexed. Finding the discussion of the deceiving spirit genuinely disturbing, he turns to more recent writings, only to encounter stories concerning brains in vats. Since he can think of no way of showing that he is not a brain in a vat, he succumbs, in Berkeley's phrase, to

a “forlorn skepticism” concerning the world around him. Since he earnestly seeks a way out of his perplexities, let’s call him Ernest. We will imagine various representatives of the New Epistemology appearing before Ernest, much as the comforters appeared before Job. We will allow an externalist, a contextualist, and then a neo-Pyrrhonian to address him in turn.

We can begin with an externalist (or proto-externalist). When Ernest expresses his anxiety about not being justified in thinking that he has arms and legs because he can come up with no good reasons for thinking he is not a brain in a vat, the externalist comforter expresses no surprise and candidly admits that, with respect to producing reasons of this kind, he is in precisely the same boat (or vat) that Ernest is. Not to worry. The inability to produce justifying reasons does not show that either he or Ernest is lacking in *knowledge* concerning, say, the number of limbs they each possess. To suppose otherwise, he tells Ernest, is to be captive of an archaic internalist conception of knowledge, where the possession and command of justificatory reasons is held to be a necessary condition for knowing something. Emancipation occurs, he continues, through severing the connection between knowledge and justification. At first dazzled, upon reflection Ernest feels dissatisfied. The question he asked in the first place was whether anyone could supply him with good *reasons* for thinking that he is not a brain in a vat. In response, the externalist seems to change the subject by saying that the possession of good reasons is not a necessary condition for knowing something. Ernest might candidly admit that before encountering externalism he believed—naively it seems—that knowledge involves the possession of adequate reasons. Corrected on that point, his basic yearnings remain. Even if he grants that it is possible to know something without possessing good reasons justifying our claim to know, he is still looking for good reasons for believing he is not a brain in a vat. So far, at least, the externalist comforter has done nothing to help him in this regard. Of course, real externalists are not usually as flatfootedly committed to externalism as my proto-externalist is. They can, for example, combine their positions with some form of contextualism and then argue that we often do have good reasons to believe that our cognitive faculties are reliable. So let’s turn to contextualism to see what aid it may provide.

At first sight, the contextualist (or proto-contextualist) seems to do better in satisfying Ernest’s yearnings for reasons. The contextualist comforter assures Ernest that often both he and Ernest possess adequate, sometimes clearly statable, reasons for believing that they are not brains in vats. The contextualist comforter might argue as follows: “Given the

present state of technology, it is wholly unlikely that brains can be supported in vats in the way described in the skeptical scenario. Thus we know that we are not brains in vats just as we know that there are no antigravity machines. With this knowledge, the skeptical doubts that were supposed to flow from this hypothesis are nullified.” (This argument actually—honestly—comes from Quine.) Ernest has qualms. “But even so,” he replies, “if I am a brain in vat, couldn’t my beliefs about the present state of technology be brain probe-induced falsehoods?” Let’s suppose that the contextualist toughs it out and admits that yes, these beliefs could have been induced by electric stimulation—that is, he makes no move in the direction of declaring the skeptical hypothesis unintelligible or incoherent. Acknowledging the coherence of the skeptical hypothesis, the contextualist argues that taking this possibility seriously shifts the context, and in this new, more demanding, or at least different context, Ernest does not know, for, in this new context, his reasons are no longer adequate. So to Ernest’s original question, “Are there adequate reasons for my believing that I am not a brain in a vat?” the answer is: “It all depends—it all depends on context.”

The key move in the contextualist response to skepticism is to refuse to assign a privileged status to epistemological contexts. That is, the contextualist rejects the view that *strictly speaking* we do not know something unless it meets the demand that all possible defeaters have been eliminated: a view, the contextualist can point out, that almost automatically generates strong skeptical conclusions. What the contextualist says instead is something like this: In the context of an informed understanding of present technology, we do know that we are not brains in vats, whereas in a context governed by traditional epistemological demands we do not. There is no contradiction here because the standards of relevance and rigor are different in the two cases.

“What about the fruitcakes?” This is Ernest’s next question. He has noticed that the world is filled with people who hold wildly different views about the general disposition of the world around them. They seem to have only one thing in common: a deep intolerance for views other than their own. There is, for example, a brisk competition among various Pentecostals. Can they be said to know things—each in his or her own Pentecostal way? Will a thoroughgoing contextualist have to say yes? I do not know, for the contextualist, when pressed on this matter, tends to brush it aside, dismissing it as tedious and sophomoric.

I do not know of any contextualist who can deal adequately with Ernest’s problem with the fruitcakes of this world. Keith DeRose’s version

of contextualism is a case in point. His position is an elaboration of what he calls the “Basic Strategy”: “According to the contextualist solution, . . . the sceptic’s present denials that we know various things are perfectly compatible with our ordinary claims to know those very propositions. Once we realize this, we can see how both the skeptic’s denials of knowledge and our ordinary attributions of knowledge can be correct.”¹⁸

Now, for DeRose, responding to the skeptical challenge is a matter of finding some way to neutralize arguments of the following kind:

The Argument from Ignorance

1. I don’t know that not-H.
 2. If I don’t know that not-H, then I don’t know that O.
- So,
- C. I don’t know O.

Specifically, DeRose takes H to be the skeptical hypothesis that I am a brain in vat and O the observationally based claim that I have hands.

DeRose notes something that others have noted before him: the fact that (1) and (2) validly imply (C) has no tendency by itself to establish the truth of (C). A valid inference is neutral with respect to *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*. DeRose thinks that this presents us with four options.

1. The Skeptical Option: accept both premises, and from them draw the strong skeptical conclusion (C).
2. Moore’s Option: Argue that we are more certain of the falsehood of the conclusion than we are of the truth of the premises and leave it at that.
3. The anti-closure move: Deny (2).
4. The DeRose Ploy: Both affirm and deny (1) as needed.

(In an exercise of overkill, someone might deny both (1) and (2), but I will ignore this response.)

Roughly (very roughly), where Nozick (for example) used possible-world semantics as a basis for denying the closure principle expressed in the second premise,¹⁹ DeRose invokes possible-world semantics in order to reject the first premise. I do not find either use of possible-world semantics persuasive because I do not see how appeals to possible worlds can, in general, provide nonarbitrary truth-conditions for subjunctive conditionals. That, however, is a complicated matter that I do not want to go into here. One thing worth noting, however, is that DeRose speaks as if there are just *two* sorts of contexts: the philosophical (with its “very high standards”) and the ordinary (with its “more relaxed standards”), whereas

contexts can differ in the kinds of standards they employ and not simply in the stringency with which they are employed. The result is that a plurality of possible contexts can exist, each with its associated structure on possible worlds and each autonomously determining epistemic evaluations on its own terms. Pentecostals can avail themselves of possible-world semantics too. A contextualism of the DeRose variety seems to make the fruitcake problem unsolvable.

So it seems that neither our externalist comforter nor our contextualist comforter will provide comfort for Ernest. If he is seeking *reasons* for thinking that he is not a brain in a vat, being told that knowledge is possible in the absence of justificatory reasons hardly helps. Even setting aside the problem of fruitcakes (but not forgetting it), the contextualist meets Ernest's demands for reasons but overdoes things by telling him that he both does and does not possess them. If the context is ordinary (or plain) then he does have adequate—or at least very good—reasons for believing that he is not a brain in a vat. If the context is epistemological, well, then he does not. But Ernest's present context is epistemological, so his conversation with the contextualist seems to reinforce, rather than resolve, his skeptical doubts.

What will the Pyrrhonian skeptic say to Ernest? Pretty much what was said in the last few paragraphs. If you epistemologize in earnest, then you will be led to skepticism. If you turn to epistemologists for help, they will provide none, perhaps make things worse—or so it seems.

But perhaps I have been too hard on the New Epistemologists. I have tended to treat them as closet Old Epistemologists maintaining the family business, though under straightened conditions. On that reading, they remain targets—though diminished targets—of Pyrrhonian attack. There is a more generous way of viewing our New Epistemologists: they are emerging neo-Pyrrhonians, and they simply have not faced up to this fact. The central concern of the Pyrrhonists was the claimed capacity of their dogmatic opponents to present adequate reasons in behalf of their dogmas as, following their own standards, they pretended to do. The central maneuver of Pyrrhonists was to challenge the dogmatists to produce such reasons. The externalists who sever the connection between knowledge and reason-giving justification should have no quarrel with this. The contextualists, for their part, simply reject the ideal of traditional epistemology by succumbing to the Pyrrhonian mode of relativity.

An image from my favorite philosophical novel, Samuel Beckett's *Watt*, illustrates what I have in mind. Beckett describes Watt's method of locomotion in these words:

Watt's method of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling out his leg as far as possible towards the south . . . and so on, over and over again, many many times, until he reached his destination, and could sit down.²⁰

We can add a further element of absurdity. As described, by placing one foot at least slightly ahead of the other, Watt manages to move very slowly forward. But suppose we let his leg swing even a longer arc so that one foot comes down slightly in back of the other. (Though admittedly not easy, this stride is actually possible.) The result is that Watt, though apparently striving to move forward, is, instead, slowly backing up.

Now change the perspective and view this activity from the rear. We then get the image of someone seemingly making every effort to flee, but backing up instead. This is how the skeptics are coming: They are the New Epistemologists who, with what seem to be elaborate efforts to the contrary, are backing up—incremental step by incremental step—into skepticism: neo-Pyrrhonian skepticism.

Notes

1. Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield, eds., *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2. To my mortification, I recently noticed a similar entry in the index prepared for *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. We can, however, avoid embarrassment on this matter by exploiting ideas from Donald Davidson's "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 47 [1973–74]: 5–20). According to Davidson, rather than attributing inconceivable error or ignorance to someone, it is always preferable to find an interpretation of the person's words that brings them, as far as possible, into line with reasonable belief. This is easy enough in the present case. We interpret the word "Empiricus" to mean "Sextus," and interpret the word "Sextus" to mean "Empiricus." That still leaves the pesky comma, which we will interpret as meaning nothing at all. This, in miniature, shows how, by using the principle of charitable interpretation, we can always avoid attributing inexplicable error to another. But I digress, even before I get started.

3. I try to make a plausible case for this claim in part 2 of *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). The five modes attributed to Agrippa appear in Sextus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 164–77. See Benson Mates's translation in *The Skeptic Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 110–12.

4. Even though Sextus is perfectly clear in his commitment to a thoroughgoing noncommittalism, people get him wrong on this point—Christopher Hill, for example, in the DeRose/Warfield anthology cited earlier. In defending his own version of reliabilism, Hill attempts to embarrass a skeptical critic with the following maneuver: “Let us suppose that process reliabilism is true, and that the skeptic *does* have an obligation to consider this question. . . . Well, since questions of reliability are empirical questions, the sceptic would be under an obligation to appeal to empirical data. An appeal of this sort would of course be something of an embarrassment to the skeptic, holding as he does that no empirical beliefs are empirically justified. But, what is worse, it seems that it would be impossible for him to come up with empirical data of the required sort. [Then this!] Thus, pace Sextus Empiricus, it seems that it would be impossible to find empirical data that would establish that perceptual processes are globally unreliable” (125). This certainly seems to attribute to Sextus the view “that no empirical beliefs are justified,” precisely the negative dogmatism that Sextus explicitly rejects.

5. See, for example, Jonathan Barnes, “The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,” in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, ed. E. J. Kenny and M. M. MacKenzie (1982), 2–29, and Myles Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?” in *Doubt and Dogmatism*, ed. M. Schofield, M. F. Burnyeat, and J. Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 20–53.

6. See Michael Frede, “The Skeptic’s Beliefs,” in *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 179–200.

7. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 218.

8. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 159.

9. *Ibid.*, 161.

10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969).

11. See David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74.4 (1996): 549–67. There is not time to discuss this subtle and complex article here. I discuss it in detail in an essay titled “Two Diagnoses of Skepticism,” in *The Skeptics: Contemporary Essays*, ed. Steven Luper (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003), 137–47.

12. I owe my arcane knowledge of *catacosmesis* to Richard A. Lanham’s *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

13. Their fishiness is aired in Barry Stroud’s classic article “Transcendental Arguments,” *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968).

14. See Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Skepticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), particularly 149–55.

15. Indeed, if our second-order beliefs about what we know also track the truth, then, for all we know, we know that we know certain things. In principle,

nothing stops us from going all the way up the epistemic ladder of nesting knowings. Contrary to the cartesian skeptic's claim, for all we know (and for all he knows) we may know a heck of a lot.

16. This might be a useful thing to do, if, for example, you are trying to assure someone (perhaps yourself) that a feared amputation has not been performed. For Moore's argument, see "Proof of an External World," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25 (1939). It is reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959).

17. See Thompson Clarke, "The Legacy of Skepticism," *Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972): 764–69.

18. Keith DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," *Philosophical Review* 104 (1995): 5.

19. See Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), chap. 3, section 2.

20. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1963), 28.