

Pragmatic Skepticism

Susanna Rinard
Harvard University

Abstract

Pragmatic responses to skepticism have been overlooked in recent decades. This paper explores one such response by developing a character called the Pragmatic Skeptic. The Pragmatic Skeptic accepts skeptical arguments for the claim that we lack good evidence for our ordinary beliefs, and that they do not constitute knowledge. However, they do not think we should give up our beliefs in light of these skeptical conclusions. Rather, we should retain them, since we have good practical reasons for doing so. This takes the sting out of skepticism: we can be skeptics, of a kind, without thereby succumbing to practical or intellectual disaster. I respond to objections, and compare the position of the Pragmatic Skeptic to views found in the work of (among others) David Hume, William James, David Lewis, Berislav Marušić, and Robert Pasnau.

0. Introduction

Perhaps the central challenge for a philosophical treatment of skepticism is to identify, on the one hand, the ways in which skeptical arguments are plausible and perhaps even correct; and, on the other, how they nonetheless go wrong. Different responses seek this balance in ways that are more, or less, concessive to the skeptic. Some (e.g. Hume 1993 and 2002, Stroud 1984, and Lewis 1996) are quite concessive; others (e.g. Moore 1962, Pryor 2000, and Williamson 2000) are not. This paper explores a pragmatic response to skepticism—one that, while squarely on the concessive end of the spectrum, nonetheless identifies a clear sense in which the skeptic is mistaken.

Pragmatic responses to skepticism have not received much attention in recent decades. An extensive and meticulous survey of recent work on skepticism (Pritchard 2002) makes no mention of them. Here I develop one particular version of this strategy, respond to objections, and compare it with certain other views. It is not my aim to convince those already committed to other responses to skepticism, or even to convince the skeptic herself. Rather, I aim merely to highlight some advantages of a largely overlooked strategy for handling skepticism.

1. The Doubting Skeptic and the Pragmatic Skeptic

The response to skepticism developed here will be illustrated by a character I call the *Pragmatic Skeptic*. We can see their position as motivated by an encounter with the *Doubting Skeptic*. The Doubting Skeptic begins by giving an argument for *Evidential Skepticism*, which says (roughly) that we do not have good evidence for our ordinary beliefs. (In my view, knowledge typically requires evidence, so this entails that ordinary beliefs generally do not constitute knowledge.¹ Justification is discussed in section 3.)

I take the notion of evidence as primitive. However, some things can be said: it is essential to this notion, as understood here, that evidence is a *guide to truth*. As such, it must be, in some sense, both indicative of truth, and recognizable as such to the agent. There is some sense in which the best strategy for getting at the truth is to believe what is best supported by your evidence.

We can distinguish different varieties of Evidential Skepticism by looking at which sets of propositions they target. The Doubting Skeptic gives an argument for skepticism about the external world and perhaps also skepticism about the past, induction, and more. Exactly how

¹ Of course, one might deny that knowledge typically requires evidence. If so, then Evidential Skepticism may be compatible with the claim that we nonetheless have knowledge. Pasnau (2015) discusses this possibility in more detail.

these arguments are formulated won't matter here. My preferred formulations of skeptical arguments targeting justification appear in other work (Rinard 2018); parallel arguments for Evidential Skepticism can easily be constructed.

When I say that, according to the Evidential Skeptic, we lack *good* evidence for ordinary beliefs, how good is “good”? Here I remain intentionally vague, but the skeptic I have in mind thinks that, for many ordinary beliefs, our evidence doesn't favor them over certain alternatives. For example, one's evidence doesn't favor the hypothesis that they have hands, which cause them to have hand experiences, over the hypothesis that they're a handless brain-in-a-vat being fed hand experiences. (After all, they will say, our sensory experiences are the only evidence we have, and both hypotheses predict them equally well.) Thus Evidential Skepticism is similar in spirit to the *Full-Blooded Skepticism* of Kornblith 2000, or the *Strong Skepticism* of Huemer 2001, on which we have no epistemic justification for ordinary beliefs at all, and not like Kornblith's *High Standards Skepticism*, or Huemer's *Weak Skepticism*, or the skepticism defended in Russell 1912 (called by Wright (1991) “the Russellian Retreat”), or Lehrer 1971, according to which our evidence *does* favor ordinary beliefs over alternatives, it's just that the degree of evidential support doesn't suffice for knowledge.

The Doubting Skeptic concludes that, since we lack good evidence for ordinary beliefs, we ought to give up those beliefs, and suspend judgment instead. The sense of “ought” here is one that is appropriately guiding. The Doubting Skeptic doesn't assert, in a detached academic way, that, in some special sense of “ought,” we ought to suspend judgment. Rather, they *urge* us to give up our beliefs, as a vegetarian urges us to give up meat (analogy from Meeker 2013). I say more about this sense of “ought” in section 3.

I will now briefly sketch the position of the Pragmatic Skeptic. Their position will be fleshed out more fully, and defended in more detail, over the course of the paper.

The Pragmatic Skeptic is convinced by the Doubting Skeptic's arguments that we lack good evidence for ordinary beliefs. However, the Pragmatic Skeptic holds that there are only practical reasons for belief. (Here, something is a *practical* reason if it's the sort of consideration that could serve as a reason for action. Thus moral reasons are included, along with prudential reasons, etc.) So, the Pragmatic Skeptic does not think it follows from Evidential Skepticism that we ought to give up our ordinary beliefs. On the contrary, they think we ought to retain these beliefs, because we are all better off doing so. Moreover, even though, when confronted by the Doubting Skeptic, they are happy to agree that we lack evidence for our ordinary beliefs, and that these beliefs do not constitute knowledge, they see good reasons for sometimes making assertions in other circumstances that imply, or presuppose, that we *do* have evidence for ordinary beliefs, and that they *do* constitute knowledge. For example, suppose a stranger on the street asks if they know what time it is. The best way to help such a person is not to respond by presenting skeptical arguments showing that knowledge is impossible. Even if such arguments are sound, to help this person it is best to simply say "yes" and report the time. There are many other situations in which the ordinary business of life is best carried out by engaging in ordinary epistemic linguistic practices.

A further question, which I will leave open here, is whether the Pragmatic Skeptic believes these ordinary epistemic claims when they make them. On one version of the character, the Pragmatic Skeptic continues to believe Evidential Skepticism at all times and in all circumstances, and so they always regard ordinary epistemic claims as false, though they sometimes see good reason to make them. On another version of the character, they really

believe these claims in certain situations. This version of the Pragmatic Skeptic will exhibit systematic, ongoing diachronic inconsistency in their beliefs: when confronted with or reminded of the skeptical argument, they endorse Evidential Skepticism; but, at other times, they are disposed to believe things incompatible with it. They can predict that they will exhibit diachronic inconsistency of this kind and see nothing illegitimate or problematic about it.

For the purposes of this paper, it will not matter which of these ways we suppose the Pragmatic Skeptic to be. The important thing is that, while the Pragmatic Skeptic does endorse Evidential Skepticism on some occasions, this doesn't prevent them from engaging in ordinary epistemic linguistic behavior in other situations.

The Pragmatic Skeptic may sound rather Humean to some readers. Indeed, there are important similarities here, although the comparison is made complicated by disagreement among interpreters of Hume. Both Hume and the Pragmatic Skeptic display a kind of back-and-forth behavior, in which they are skepticism-friendly (in certain respects) in academic contexts, but nonetheless continue to have ordinary (non-epistemic) beliefs (at least in ordinary contexts), and emphasize that they're better off doing so. There may be differences, however. Although some commentators (such as Meeker (2013)) take Hume to endorse Evidential Skepticism, others do not. Moreover, it may be that, in his skeptical mode, Hume is more like the Doubting Skeptic than the Pragmatic Skeptic. He writes in the *Enquiry* that the skeptic "seems, for a time at least, to destroy all assurance and conviction." (1993, 110) The Pragmatic Skeptic, on the other hand, retains ordinary beliefs, and thinks they ought to, even while staring Evidential Skepticism in the face. Also, while Hume repeatedly emphasizes that, given our nature, we cannot help but believe, the Pragmatic Skeptic makes no such claim. Finally, while the Pragmatic Skeptic carries their pragmatism about the ethics of belief into all situations, it's

unclear whether Hume is a pragmatist, in this sense, in any situation, and some remarks suggest evidentialist sympathies (e.g., again in the Enquiry, “A wise man...proportions his belief to the evidence.” (1993, 73)). In short, while there are definite similarities between Hume and the Pragmatic Skeptic, there may be important differences. Though it would doubtless be enlightening, I will resist the temptation to take the space required for a more extended comparison.

Also similar to the Pragmatic Skeptic is William James in “The Will to Believe” (1979), though once again, complexities of interpretation make it unclear just how similar, and I cannot take the space for a detailed comparison here. (The anti-skeptical strategies of other American pragmatists, such as C.S. Peirce and James Dewey, have relatively little in common with the Pragmatic Skeptic.) James’ few remarks on skepticism in “The Will to Believe” suggest that he has some sympathy for views in the vicinity of Evidential Skepticism, and that he aims to respond to the Doubting Skeptic in the same way he responds to the religious skeptic (who argues that, since our evidence doesn’t settle the matter, we should suspend judgment on religious claims). (Both Weintraub (1997, 26) and Mounce (1997, 96) interpret James in this way). Some take James’ response to the religious skeptic as essentially involving appeal to the pragmatic consideration that we are better off with religious beliefs than without them. If so, then he may well have, like the Pragmatic Skeptic, intended considerations of just this kind to constitute a response to the Doubting Skeptic.

Pragmatic Skepticism also resembles the “moderate skepticism” defended, more recently, in Marušić (2010). Both of these skeptics accept the conclusions of skeptical arguments when attending to them, but continue to engage in ordinary epistemic linguistic behavior in other circumstances. There are important differences, though. Marušić’s moderate skeptic is not a

pragmatist about the ethics of belief. Also, Marušić takes his moderate skepticism to be compatible with contextualism and certain other semantic theories on which ordinary knowledge ascriptions are *true*, whereas Pragmatic Skepticism is not. This is because Marušić’s moderate skeptic makes only an epistemological claim, and Marušić takes the contextualist skeptic and the invariantist skeptic to differ only on a question of linguistic theory. My own view is that it is not so easy to separate linguistic and epistemological questions, because it is not so easy to separate the question of what “knows” means from the question of what one knows.

As we have seen, the Pragmatic Skeptic endorses both Evidential Skepticism and a kind of pragmatism about reasons for belief. Although both of these claims are controversial, I will not defend them at length in this paper.² I have defended pragmatism about reasons for belief—in the form of a view I call Equal Treatment—in other papers (Rinard 2017 and Rinard forthcoming). My project in this paper is not to defend this view, but rather to apply it to skepticism. In the next section I discuss whether it is appropriate to simply dismiss any view that is committed to skepticism, as epistemologists routinely do.

Before doing so, however, I will point out that these two views—Evidential Skepticism and Pragmatism (about reasons for belief)—fit together nicely, in that each makes the other more plausible. As we have seen, Evidential Skepticism, if combined with Evidentialism, has the extreme result that we ought to give up our beliefs. When combined with Pragmatism, however, it does not have this result. So Pragmatism makes Evidential Skepticism more plausible, by preventing it from having this extreme result. Evidential Skepticism also makes Pragmatism more plausible. Evidentialism is compelling in part because we are attracted to the idea of having a pure collection of beliefs, every one of which is rooted in strong evidential support. If

² Some of the lines of argument given in the paper require only the view that there are practical reasons for belief, not the stronger view that there are only practical reasons for belief. For reasons of space I omit discussion of which arguments require the stronger, and which merely the weaker, claim.

Evidential Skepticism is true, however, then it is impossible for any of our beliefs to have this status. In the presence of Evidential Skepticism, Evidentialism would lead not to a thriving garden of firmly evidentially rooted beliefs, but rather, to a doxastic desert with no beliefs at all. This removes a main part of the attraction to Evidentialism, thereby making Pragmatism more plausible.

2. **Should Evidential Skepticism be taken seriously?**

By and large, contemporary epistemologists do not take seriously the possibility that radical skepticism might be true. One manifestation of this is the widespread use of an inference pattern we might call *reductio ad skepticism*, in which one first demonstrates that a particular view leads to skepticism, and then concludes that that view must be false. The validity of this inference form is simply taken for granted. As Bryan Frances writes, "...the notion of skepticism elicits strange behavior in philosophers, especially epistemologists...Philosophers are pretty much professionally *forbidden* from being radical skeptics even though we aren't forbidden from believing any of many other comparably outlandish claims." (2005, vii)

The situation is interesting indeed. It is almost universally agreed that the premises of skeptical arguments are highly plausible. (Though the focus is usually knowledge or justification, the premises of parallel arguments for Evidential Skepticism are no less plausible.) Indeed, a response to skepticism that involves the denial of one of these premises is considered incomplete unless it also explains why, despite its putative falsity, we found the premise so very plausible in the first place. Moreover, there is no single alternative to Evidential Skepticism that has received widespread acceptance. Each of the main contenders—such as dogmatism (e.g. Pryor 2000); the view that we can know a priori that skeptical scenarios don't obtain;

explanationism (e.g. Vogel 1990); disjunctivism (e.g. Pritchard 2012); etc.—faces a host of critics offering powerful objections.

So, no alternative to Evidential Skepticism has found widespread acceptance, and it is almost universally acknowledged that the premises of arguments leading to it are highly plausible. I suggest it is high time epistemologists take seriously the possibility that Evidential Skepticism is *true*. Why is there so much resistance to doing so? Why is it that, as Frances says, philosophers are “pretty much professionally *forbidden* from being radical skeptics”? I will consider two possible explanations in turn.

First, many philosophers follow G.E. Moore in rejecting Evidential Skepticism on the grounds that it is incompatible with common sense. It is just *common sense*, so the line goes, that we know we have hands; that we have excellent evidence that the next raven I see will be black; etc. And philosophical argument, it is claimed, is impotent in the face of common sense. I have argued against this elsewhere (Rinard 2013). Like science, philosophy is, I claim, quite capable of overturning common sense.

Moreover, the way in which the Pragmatic Skeptic rejects these “common sense” claims is particularly inoffensive. The Pragmatic Skeptic thinks that, although they are false, we nonetheless ought to assert (and perhaps even believe) them much of the time. This gives her a ready explanation for why people are so drawn to these claims, even though they are (on her view) false: it is (usually) true that we ought to assert, and perhaps even believe, them. There is an interesting symmetry here between the Pragmatic Skeptic and the Moorean anti-skeptic. Both acknowledge that we find the premises of the argument for Evidential Skepticism, as well as the negation of its conclusion, initially very plausible. They just disagree about where we’re mistaken. The anti-skeptic seeks to legitimate the plausibility we find in the idea that we do have

knowledge, and offers an error theory about the plausibility we find in the skeptic's premises. The strategy of the Pragmatic Skeptic is precisely the reverse: they seek to vindicate the plausibility we find in the skeptic's premises, and offer an error theory about the plausibility of ordinary claims to knowledge.

In fact, there is a way in which the Pragmatic Skeptic is actually *more* commonsensical than the Moorean. Many people are disposed, when they first encounter skepticism, to have a pattern of attitudes over time that philosophers easily dismiss as confused. On the one hand, when considering arguments for skepticism, they embrace the conclusions unhesitatingly. On the other hand, in daily life they unhesitatingly assert all manner of claims to knowledge and evidence.³ Many philosophers, taking for granted that this diachronic inconsistency is problematic, pressure such people to make a choice. Which is it? Do we have evidence (or knowledge), or don't we? The Mooreans among them will say that, if forced to choose, clearly we should choose in favor of knowledge, and so they seek to annihilate the skeptical attitude that comes so naturally in the seminar room. But according to the Pragmatic Skeptic, we don't have to make a choice. The skeptic is *right* that we lack evidence, and knowledge; and there's no harm in acknowledging this in the seminar room. However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't continue to assert (and perhaps even believe), in other circumstances, that we do have quite a lot of knowledge and evidence. In fact, this is precisely what we ought to do. So in this sense the Pragmatic Skeptic is more commonsensical than the Moorean: they seek to vindicate, rather than stamp out, the fluid, back-and-forth behavior that comes so naturally to many of us.

Of course, vindicating this behavior is also one of the main aims of contextualism (e.g. Lewis 1996 and DeRose 1995). The contextualist and the Pragmatic Skeptic both agree that,

³ Jennifer Nagel (ms) writes that ordinary people, though "not naturally skeptics," are "naturally susceptible to short-lived spells of skepticism." This claim is anchored in empirical data (Nagel, San Juan et al 2013 and Alexander, Gonnerman et al. 2014).

even though skeptical arguments are, when on display, utterly compelling, there is nothing wrong with our practice of, in ordinary contexts, taking ourselves to have knowledge. I will not take the space here for an in-depth comparison of these views. What I will do, though, is briefly describe two objections critics have made to contextualism, and note that they do not apply to the Pragmatic Skeptic. (I will not undertake to settle whether these objections are ultimately successful.)

According to contextualism, “knows” is contextually variable, so assertions of “I know I have hands” and the like can be false in the seminar room but true in ordinary contexts. The first objection is that the contextualist must posit a fair degree of *semantic ignorance* (Schiffer 1996, Hawthorne 2004, and others). Ordinary speakers are ignorant of the fact that “knows” is contextually variable, and that is why they mistakenly think that what the skeptic says in the seminar room is incompatible with our ordinary claims to know. Such semantic ignorance is implausible and surprising, especially when we consider that ordinary speakers are not normally tripped up by the contextual variability of other terms, such as indexicals like “I” and “now.” Since the Pragmatic Skeptic thinks that the claims of the skeptic *are* incompatible with our ordinary claims to know, they do not posit such semantic ignorance, and have no need to.

According to many contextualists, what differs from context to context is *how much* evidence (or epistemic justification) is required for knowledge. Standards are high in skeptical contexts, but lower in ordinary contexts. The second objection (from Kornblith 2000) is that, although this variety of contextualism is touted as relatively skeptic-friendly, it actually completely overlooks the most interesting and historically most important versions of skepticism, which are more like Kornblith’s Full-Blooded Skepticism (or Evidential Skepticism). These skeptics don’t just claim that we don’t have *enough* evidence (or justification) for ordinary

beliefs like “I have hands” to constitute knowledge. They argue that we don’t even have *more* evidence for them than for certain alternatives (like “I’m a handless brain-in-a-vat.”) So, no matter how low the standards for knowledge supposedly are in ordinary contexts, we won’t count as knowing that we have hands. High-and-low-standards contextualism does nothing to address skepticism of this kind. Pragmatic Skepticism, on the other hand, is built to accommodate exactly this variety of skepticism.

In short, the fact that Pragmatic Skepticism and contextualism share some of the same central motivations—such as the impulse to vindicate our natural disposition to reject knowledge claims in the seminar room but endorse them in ordinary life—and yet, the former avoids some key objections to the latter—is another reason not to dismiss Pragmatic Skepticism solely on the grounds that it is committed to Evidential Skepticism.

Another possible explanation for epistemologists’ refusal to take seriously the possibility that Evidential Skepticism might be true is that they have overly apocalyptic ideas about what the truth of Evidential Skepticism would entail. It is natural to think that Evidential Skepticism must lead to Doubting Skepticism, which counsels radical suspension of judgment, which could, as Hume suggested, lead to a potentially fatal inability to act. A common charge against the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics was that their skepticism is *unlivable*. Tales are told of Pyrrho being saved from walking into wells only by his devoted disciples. Surely this is not the behavior of someone who has the doxastic attitudes he ought to have, and who acts appropriately on them—and yet it can seem that Evidential Skepticism would have exactly this consequence.

It can also seem that intellectual disaster, if not practical disaster, would follow from Evidential Skepticism. Crispin Wright, discussing inductive skepticism, writes, “What primarily seems disconcerting about the sceptical argument is the apparent implication that there is no

rational basis for preferring the methodology of empirical science to divination of entrails or the tarot pack. Reichenbach complains about Hume that ‘...he is not alarmed by his discovery; he does not realize that, if there is no escape from the dilemma pointed out by him, science might as well not be continued...if there is no justification for inductive inference, the working procedure of science sinks to the level of a game.’ ” (2004, 185)

The Pragmatic Skeptic illustrates a way in which one can accept Evidential Skepticism while avoiding both practical and intellectual disaster. The Pragmatic Skeptic still believes that they are much safer staying out of wells, and so they act accordingly. It’s just that, when confronted with the skeptical argument, they will concede that this and similar beliefs lack evidential support, and do not constitute knowledge. The Pragmatic Skeptic still believes that the sun will rise tomorrow; they continue to trust properly scientific results and, if appropriate, to engage in scientific inquiry themselves.⁴ It’s just that, if pressed, they’re happy to admit that they lack good evidence for these beliefs.

Some find the very idea that Evidential Skepticism might be true just plain depressing, even if it doesn’t result in practical or intellectual disaster. For example, Stewart Cohen writes, “The way I see it, what is troubling and unacceptable about skepticism is the claim that all along in our everyday discourse, when we have been claiming to . . . know, we have been speaking falsely.” (1999, 80) First, let me observe that an evidentialist couldn’t take this as a reason not to believe Evidential Skepticism. That something would be distressing, if true, is no evidence that it’s not. More importantly, though, in section 5 I will suggest that becoming a Pragmatic Skeptic can actually improve your life and make you a better person. (I’ll also note that, in my

⁴ One way to see this is to observe that the Pragmatic Skeptic can believe the purely descriptive claim that scientific methods for forming beliefs are, as a matter of contingent fact, more reliable than alternative methods. When they want to get to the truth about some issue, therefore, they will be inclined to trust science, other things equal.

experience, accepting Evidential Skepticism has been more exciting and interesting than depressing. Frankly, I recommend it.)

It has been my aim in this section to take some steps toward dislodging the attitude, common among contemporary epistemologists, that any view according to which Evidential Skepticism is true can be for that reason immediately dismissed. Such views—especially those which, like Pragmatic Skepticism, have other advantages—deserve at least to be carefully considered and explored. That is the project of this paper.

3. Varieties of Ought, Justification, and Rationality

The Doubting Skeptic claims that we ought to suspend judgment on ordinary beliefs; the Pragmatic Skeptic denies this. As noted above, the sense of “ought” here is one that is appropriately guiding. It takes into account all relevant considerations, and is in that sense all-things-considered. In other work (Rinard forthcoming) I have called it the *guidance-giving* should. (I use “ought” and “should” interchangeably). The paradigm context for this *should* is deliberation—that is, deliberation, for some ϕ , about whether to ϕ . For example, consider someone trying to decide whether or not to live in the country. It would be natural to describe what they’re doing by making use of the word “should.” They might say, “I’m trying to figure out whether I should live in the country or not.” The guidance-giving should is the ought whose proper role is to guide us in deliberation about what to do or believe. Just as there is a guidance-giving *should*, there is a guidance-giving sense of *normative reason*. In paradigm cases, what one should, in the guidance-giving sense, do or believe, is a matter of the balance of guidance-giving reasons. It is in this guidance-giving sense that there are, according to the Pragmatic Skeptic, only practical reasons for belief.

The following question arises for the Pragmatic Skeptic: Are the guidance-giving should and guidance-giving reasons objective (relative to the facts), or subjective (relative to the agent's beliefs)? For present purposes, it doesn't matter. The Pragmatic Skeptic thinks that, *in fact*, we are better off if we have beliefs than if we suspend judgement. So, the Pragmatic Skeptic thinks that, in the objective sense, we ought to have beliefs. Moreover, the Pragmatic Skeptic sees that, given what they believe, we are better off with beliefs. So they also hold that, in the subjective sense, we ought to have beliefs.

Sometimes it is proposed that we recognize a sense of "should" that is determined neither by the facts, nor by what the agent believes, but by what they know. Similarly, some claim that a proposition can be a reason for an agent only if they know it.⁵ The Pragmatic Skeptic will deny that this conception of "should," and "reason," is legitimate and important, at least for the purpose of guiding deliberation. After all, according to the Pragmatic Skeptic there are many truths that we believe, but don't know, to which our deliberation had better be sensitive. For example, suppose the Pragmatic Skeptic is trying to decide whether to drink water or hemlock. They believe—truly—that water is safe, and that hemlock is fatally poisonous. By their own lights, this belief, though true, does not constitute knowledge. It would be crazy, and dangerous, for them to therefore not take it into account in deliberation.

We have seen that, according to the Pragmatic Skeptic, we lack good evidence for ordinary beliefs, and they don't constitute knowledge, but we should have them nonetheless. This leaves unanswered a number of questions: Are ordinary beliefs *justified*? Are they *rational*? And what about distinctively *epistemic* senses of these notions? Should we, in the *epistemic* sense of "should," have ordinary beliefs? Are they *epistemically* justified, or rational?

⁵ For example, Unger 1975, Chapter V, makes this claim.

The Pragmatic Skeptic holds that, just as in the case of “should,” there is an all-things-considered, guidance-giving sense of “justified” and “rational.” Since we ought, in this sense, to have ordinary beliefs, they are, in this sense, justified and rational.

My own view is that putative *epistemic* senses of “should,” “reason,” “justified,” and “rational” are not in good standing. (Here I am in agreement with Cohen 2016.) Nonetheless, the official position of this paper—and that of the Pragmatic Skeptic—leaves room for a multitude of different senses of these terms. I will conduct the discussion in terms of “should” and “reason,” but parallel considerations apply to “justified” and “rational.” I will allow that there may be a special sense of “should” and “reason” that corresponds to the rules of law, as well as grammar, etiquette, the Bible, *Possum Living*, the mafia, the jaywalking club, etc. In short, for every possible rule, no matter how arbitrary, unimportant, or downright evil, there is a corresponding sense of “should” and “reason.” If so, then why not also an *epistemic* sense of “should” and “reason”? The Pragmatic Skeptic will be happy to agree that, on certain conceptions of the epistemic, if we lack good evidence for ordinary beliefs, then we epistemically shouldn’t have them, and we have no epistemic reasons for them. Similarly, the Pragmatic Skeptic will be happy to agree that, in the jaywalking sense, we should never use crosswalks; in the grammar sense, one should never employ a singular “they;” etc.

The important question is not whether there is *some* sense of “should” in which one should ϕ . There will always be some such sense. The important question is whether a given sense of “should” or “reason” has a constitutive connection to the all-things-considered, guidance-giving sense. For the Pragmatic Skeptic, only practical reasons are guidance-giving reasons. So the first question is: Are epistemic reasons practical reasons? In other words, is an epistemic reason the sort of consideration that could serve as a reason for action?

On many (perhaps most) conceptions of the epistemic, the answer is *no*. For example, on one view one has an epistemic reason for believing P just in case one has evidence for P. On another, one has an epistemic reason for believing P just in case one has the sort of reason that's required for knowledge. It doesn't make much sense to suppose that one could have a reason of either of these kinds for acting in a particular way, so, on these views, epistemic reasons are not practical reasons, and so, according to the Pragmatic Skeptic, they have no constitutive connection to what one should, in the guidance-giving sense, believe.

However, there are some conceptions of the epistemic on which there *are* epistemic reasons for action. Suppose, for example, that whether one epistemically should ϕ is just a matter of whether, and the extent to which, one's ϕ -ing would be conducive to having true beliefs. It makes perfect sense to ask whether a particular action would be conducive to having true beliefs, and so one can have epistemic reasons, in this sense, for acting.

But it doesn't yet follow that epistemic reasons are guidance-giving reasons. The Pragmatic Skeptic holds that *only* practical reasons are guidance-giving reasons, but not that *all* practical reasons are guidance-giving reasons. For example, jaywalking reasons are not automatically guidance-giving just because they apply to action. Epistemic reasons of this kind *may* be guidance-giving reasons, though, at least according to certain views, such as the view that true belief is intrinsically valuable, or that it's good for you. Presumably we have guidance-giving reason to pursue what is intrinsically valuable, or what is good for us.

As before, we can ask whether epistemic reasons, of this sort, are relative to the facts, or what you believe, or what you know. (I.e. do you have epistemic reason to ϕ if doing so would *in fact* be conducive to true belief, or if doing so would *given what you believe* be conducive to true belief, or if doing so would *given what you know* be conducive to true belief?) For precisely

the same reason as before, the Pragmatic Skeptic will reject the option on which we relativize to knowledge. And, as before, for our purposes it doesn't matter which of the other two we go with. For, the Pragmatic Skeptic holds that, *in fact*, our ordinary beliefs are true, so, if true belief is intrinsically valuable, and good for us, we will realize this value, and receive this benefit, if we continue to have them. Similarly, this is so relative to what the Pragmatic Skeptic believes. So, if epistemic reasons turn out to be in this way practical guidance-giving reasons, the Pragmatic Skeptic will hold that our epistemic reasons favor having ordinary beliefs.

4. Objections and Replies

Objection 1:

We can't help having ordinary beliefs, whether we want to or not. So it doesn't make sense to ask whether we *should*, in the guidance-giving sense, suspend judgment, as both the Doubting Skeptic and the Pragmatic Skeptic do. The role of this *should* is to guide us in deliberation, but it doesn't make sense to deliberate about whether to do something you can't help but do.

Reply:

Our putative inability to give up ordinary beliefs has been emphasized by many authors, including Hume, Strawson, and Peirce (1877), in their discussions of skepticism. For example, Strawson writes, "They [i.e., skeptical arguments] are to be neglected because they are idle; powerless against our naturally implanted disposition to believe." (1985, 13)

Here I remain neutral on what kind of control, if any, we have over our beliefs. I also remain neutral on what kind of control is required for something to be a genuine option—something it makes sense to deliberate about, something to which the guidance-giving should might properly apply. I will argue that even if we don't have control over our beliefs, and even if that means the guidance-giving should doesn't apply, the debate between the Doubting Skeptic and the Pragmatic Skeptic is still interesting and important. This is because we can re-interpret them as addressing the question of whether, if suspending judgment *were* an option for us, we should do it.

But supposing it's not an option, why should we care whether, if it were, we should do it? If skeptical arguments are, in this way, idle, why not, with Strawson, simply dismiss them on these grounds? The answer, I'll suggest, is that whether or not we should suspend judgment, if we could, can make a great deal of difference to how we think about ourselves and our place in the world.

I'll illustrate this with an analogy. Suppose you find yourself with a particular sexual orientation. There's nothing you could do to change: having a different sexual orientation is simply not an option for you. But this does not mean that it doesn't matter whether you think that, if changing were an option, you should do so. Suppose you initially start out thinking that there's something wrong with the way you are—you wish you were different, and you think that, if you could, you definitely should change. This view of things could lead to sadness, even depression, shame, or guilt. Your sexual orientation may feel like a great burden, even a curse. But suppose you then come to take a different view—to think that, actually, there's nothing wrong with being this way, and that even if you *could* change, there would be no reason to. This can make an enormous difference.

In short, it can matter greatly whether or not you think that, if you could change a certain fundamental aspect of yourself, you should do it. Other examples can be used to illustrate this point. For example, it could make a world of difference to a deaf person whether they think that, if they could change this feature of themselves, they should.

Like your bodily abilities and your sexual orientation, your basic view of the world is a fundamental feature of yourself. Even if it turns out that suspending judgment isn't an option for us, it may still be deeply important to us whether, if it were, we should do it. If the Doubting Skeptic is right, and the answer is *yes*, we might feel very differently about our beliefs. We might come to view them as something to be regretted, or even guilty of or ashamed about. We might be frustrated with the features of our psychology that force them on us, thinking of them as unhappy limitations that get in the way of our having the doxastic states that, ideally, we ought to. Moreover, it would seem appropriate to devote time and energy to looking for a way to rid ourselves of our beliefs. Like cancer, we would think of believing as something for which we need a cure.

If the Pragmatic Skeptic is right, on the other hand, we can be at peace with our beliefs. We can endorse them as a good and useful part of our cognitive make-up, something we are grateful for, and would not want to be without. So, I conclude, the debate between the Doubting Skeptic and the Pragmatic Skeptic can be important, even if suspending judgment is not an option for us right now. It is not enough to assert, with Strawson and others, that we can't help having beliefs. Even if they are right, there is still important philosophical work to be done.

Objection 2:

Are we really better off keeping our beliefs than we would be if we suspended judgment? True, as Hume pointed out, we'd better at least act as if we believe; for example, we'd better seek out food and shelter, rather than just lying around. But we could act like we have ordinary beliefs without actually having them. For example, suppose we merely regarded ordinary external world beliefs as empirically adequate (van Fraassen (1980)). Would we be worse off?

Reply:

Someone who lacks ordinary external world beliefs would likely suffer in certain ways, even if they don't end up with a fatal variety of practical paralysis. For one thing, it would be deeply depressing to be genuinely uncertain whether your partner, family, and friends exist.⁶ Mental health patients who doubt such things seem to have a rather bad time of it. Such a person may also be less motivated to act morally. If apparently suffering people may or may not be there, and may or may not be suffering, and if our trying to help may or may not actually help them (if they are even there, and suffering), then our reasons to try to help are much less strong.

Moreover, supposing that it is actually possible for us to suspend judgment, if we try hard enough, there is the fact that doing so would require resisting our natural inclination to believe, which would be difficult and unpleasant. The fact that, if we were to suspend judgment, it would be difficult and unpleasant, is a reason not to do so. In short, given what we think the world is like, actually suspending judgment seems like a bad idea: a risky, unpleasant business, with little to recommend it.

Perhaps the most important point, though, from the perspective of the Pragmatic Skeptic, is that if the Doubting Skeptic really wants to convince us that we ought to suspend judgment,

⁶ This point is also made in Hirsch (forthcoming).

what they need to do is make the case that our practical reasons, on balance, support doing so. But what they have in fact done—namely, make the case that we lack evidence for our ordinary beliefs—simply doesn't address this question.

Objection 3:

Granted, we probably are better off retaining ordinary beliefs. But why, according to the Pragmatic Skeptic, should we believe Evidential Skepticism at all, even when confronted with skeptical arguments? Wouldn't we be better off rejecting Evidential Skepticism at all times, as, for example, Moore did?

Reply:

First, notice that nothing in the position of the Pragmatic Skeptic commits them to the claim that they, or anyone else, *ought* to believe Evidential Skepticism. They believe (at least sometimes) that Evidential Skepticism is true, and that are sound arguments for it. But, given their pragmatism about the ethics of belief, it doesn't follow from this that they ought to believe it. However, it would be unfortunate if the Pragmatic Skeptic thought they shouldn't believe Evidential Skepticism. If so, they might regret having this belief. (Whether they could do anything about it is another matter—it may be that, once they've encountered the arguments for Evidential Skepticism, they can't help but find them compelling.)

Fortunately, I see no disadvantage to believing Evidential Skepticism. As pointed out above, it would be depressing to be genuinely uncertain about whether one's friends and family really exist. However, as long as their existence is not in question, it is not upsetting to think that we lack good evidence for it. Moreover, there are advantages to embracing Evidential

Skepticism in the way the Pragmatic Skeptic does. For one thing, there is the excitement of discovering such an interesting and surprising truth. Also, as before, if resisting Evidential Skepticism *is* something they could do, plausibly they could only do it by the difficult and unpleasant task of resisting their natural inclinations—which is itself a reason not to do so. Finally, in section 5 I speculate that accepting Evidential Skepticism could make us better people—in particular, it could make us less harsh judges of those who disagree with us.

Objection 4:

If the Pragmatic Skeptic really believed Evidential Skepticism, they wouldn't be able to retain their ordinary beliefs. It is impossible to believe something while thinking that your evidence doesn't support it.

Reply:

This is not impossible. For example, many believe in God despite taking themselves to lack evidence. Or, one may be sure that a friend of theirs is innocent, even if they acknowledge that the evidence on the matter is equivocal. Or, one may be confident that they will give up smoking even though they agree the evidence suggests they won't succeed. And so on. It is true that coming to think that one of your beliefs is unsupported by the evidence often causes doubt, and it may be that accepting Evidential Skepticism could initially cause doubt in some people who ultimately become Pragmatic Sceptics. But there is nothing in principle impossible about the Pragmatic Skeptic's combination of attitudes.

Objection 5:

The Pragmatic Skeptic thinks our ordinary beliefs are true, but that we don't have good evidence for them. But don't certain ordinary beliefs entail that we have evidence for other ordinary beliefs? For example, suppose they believe that Scott said that P, and that Scott is very reliable. Doesn't that mean they have evidence for P?

Reply:

The Pragmatic Skeptic can acknowledge that some of their beliefs evidentially support others while nonetheless insisting that they do not have evidence for the latter beliefs, because they lack evidence for the former beliefs. For example, that the moon is made of green cheese may support that the moon is made of cheese, but someone who believes both may nonetheless lack evidence that the moon is made of cheese, because they lack evidence that the moon is made of green cheese. Similarly, even if the Pragmatic Skeptic thinks that Scott's reliability does evidentially support that he's right in this case, they won't think they have evidence that he's right in this case, since they don't think they have evidence that he's reliable (even though they believe it, and it's true).

Objection 6:

The Pragmatic Skeptic relies on their ordinary beliefs in arguing that we should retain those beliefs. Isn't that problematically question-begging in the context of an exchange with a Doubting Skeptic, who may suspend judgment on those very propositions?

Reply:

The Pragmatic Skeptic does not aim to convince the Doubting Skeptic that *they* ought to take up ordinary beliefs. Rather, the Pragmatic Skeptic aims to answer the question, “Should I, in light of Evidential Skepticism, give up my ordinary beliefs, or retain them?” Since, in their view, the Doubting Skeptic has failed to give them a compelling reason why they should give up their ordinary beliefs, they see nothing illegitimate about relying on them in answering this question.

There is also a deeper point to be made here. Although many of the most popular responses to skepticism do presuppose propositions that the skeptic calls into doubt, my own view, for many years, was that such responses *are* illegitimate, and that we must endeavor to convince the skeptic on their own terms. I have now abandoned this view. This is because I now think that there are arguments for skepticism about reasoning that are just as plausible as—and plausible in roughly the same way as—arguments for more commonly-discussed forms of skepticism, such as skepticism about the external world. So the most well-motivated skeptical position is one that includes skepticism about reasoning, as well as skepticism about other domains. But it is in principle impossible to respond to such a skeptic on their own terms, since they will reject any argument, for any claim whatsoever, as illegitimate.

This, I think, reduces the force of the idea that an adequate philosophical response to skepticism ought to convince the Doubting Skeptic. It’s all very well to demand this if we’re considering, for example, a mere external world skeptic, who does believe some propositions and is not in principle unwilling to be swayed by argument. But it *is* in principle impossible to

convince the skeptic who occupies what is, to my mind, the most well-motivated skeptical position. And it is unreasonable to demand that a response to skepticism do the impossible.

As it happens, I do think that there are pragmatic arguments that should convince certain limited skeptics. For example, I think there are pragmatic reasons for having ordinary external world beliefs that could be compelling to a mere external world skeptic. However, I have not taken the space to make this case here, since, as noted, in my view such partial skeptics occupy an arbitrary, unmotivated position, since they take seriously some skeptical arguments but not other, equally plausible skeptical arguments.

Objection 7:

When the soon-to-be Pragmatic Skeptic encounters the arguments of the Doubting Skeptic, their reaction is to agree that they lack evidential support for their ordinary beliefs, but not to immediately give up those beliefs. Moreover, they rely on those very beliefs in giving practical reasons why they *should* continue to have them. If this style of response is legitimate, then it should be equally legitimate to react similarly when, in ordinary life, we acquire what we take to be new evidence in light of which we come to think that some belief of ours is lacking in evidential support. For example, consider a teacher who got a set of very positive teaching evaluations last term, and as a result came to believe they are an excellent teacher. This term, though, their evaluations are decidedly negative. In light of this, they now think that their evidence, on balance, does not support that their teaching is excellent. (This person could be a Pragmatic Skeptic who is, at this time, not thinking about the skeptical argument, and who temporarily has ordinary beliefs about evidential support.) But suppose they do not give up this belief, and instead rely on it in giving practical reasons why they should continue to have it.

They may argue, for example, that since they are in fact such an excellent teacher, it would be best for them to continue believing so, since otherwise they might engage in time-wasting (and potentially detrimental) attempts to improve their teaching; they might feel undeserved sadness and disappointment in themselves; etc. Call one who reacts in this way an Overconfident Teacher.

Surely this reaction of the Overconfident Teacher is problematic. But their reaction is perfectly parallel to the Pragmatic Skeptic's response to the Doubting Skeptic. Both come to believe that one or more of their beliefs are not supported by their evidence, but they continue to have these beliefs nonetheless, and they rely on them in arguing that their practical reasons favor retaining the beliefs. Since the response of the Overconfident Teacher is illegitimate, says the objector, the parallel response of the Pragmatic Skeptic must be as well.

Reply:

The objector is correct that there are some structural similarities between the positions of the Overconfident Teacher and the Pragmatic Skeptic. Moreover, the Pragmatic Skeptic must concede that, on their view, the Overconfident Teacher ought, in the subjective sense, to believe as they do. That is, given their beliefs, they ought to continue so believing. The description of the case leaves open whether they ought, in the objective sense, to believe as they do, but even if it's true that they objectively ought to, we still feel inclined to object to the Overconfident Teacher's position. I will argue that, even though the Pragmatic Skeptic cannot maintain that the Overconfident Teacher ought to abandon their belief, they *can* hold that *we* ought to object to their position in roughly the way we are naturally inclined to do. And that, the Pragmatic Skeptic will say, is why we are inclined to think there's something problematic about the

position of the Overconfident Teacher. Moreover, the features of the Overconfident Teacher's position that the Pragmatic Skeptic will appeal to in explaining why we ought to object to it are not present in the case of the Pragmatic Skeptic. So we don't have analogous reasons to object to their position.

I'll begin by pointing out that most of the time, in ordinary life, if we were to continue to believe propositions that we take to be unsupported by our evidence, the resulting system of beliefs would have internal tensions of a kind that are not found in the beliefs of the Pragmatic Skeptic. For example, suppose that, like us, the Overconfident Teacher thinks that evaluations are generally decent (though far from perfect) indicators of teaching ability. (If you don't think this is actually true, consider some possible world where it is.) So if they continue to believe they're an excellent teacher, despite the negative evaluations, their beliefs as a whole will not cohere well with each other. They have no independent reason to think that last term's evaluations were more reliable than this term's, and yet they trust the former but not the latter. Moreover, from their perspective, it is somewhat mysterious how they ended up with a true belief on the matter. It seems to have been rather lucky. They don't think that the procedure whereby they formed their belief (i.e. arbitrarily trust some evaluations but not others) is a generally reliable one. They don't have a good explanation for how they managed to get it right in this case.

The position of the Pragmatic Skeptic, on the other hand, does not exhibit internal tensions of this kind (or at least, it doesn't exhibit such tensions in virtue of their believing beyond what they take their evidence to support). For example, their belief that they have hands was caused by an appearance as of hands, and we may suppose they are aware of this. They take hand appearances to be generally reliable indicators of hands, so it's not mysterious, or a matter

of luck, that they ended up with a true belief on the matter. They have a satisfying explanation for how they got it right in this case. Granted, they take the whole edifice to be unsupported by their evidence, but the point is that the system of beliefs as a whole does not exhibit the kind of internal tensions found in the beliefs of the Overconfident Teacher. It is not *universally* the case that one who believes beyond what they take their evidence to support thereby has tensions in their beliefs. However, this is typically true of those who believe beyond what we, in ordinary life, take our evidence to support.

Of course, given their pragmatism about the ethics of belief, the Pragmatic Skeptic won't take these observations to show that the Overconfident Teacher ought not believe as they do. Rather, these considerations will play a different role. First, let us observe that, as a contingent matter of fact, creatures like us typically do not adopt beliefs that would result in an obvious internal tension in their belief system as a whole—and, if they do, that system tends to be unstable (and the more salient the tension, the more unstable the belief system). So, those of us who may be in dialogue with an Overconfident Teacher are unlikely to share their overconfident view of their abilities. (That would amount to a tension in our own beliefs.) We will suspect they are overrating themselves, and that it would be better for them to give up the belief in their teaching excellence, since otherwise they won't take likely-much-needed steps to improve their teaching. So, given what we believe, we ought, if we can, to persuade them to give up their belief.

Moreover, the general fact that, for creatures like us, beliefs that are in tension are thereby unstable, gives us a strategy for persuading them to give up their belief: emphasize and make salient to them the ways in which their beliefs are in tension. We should exhort them to lower their estimation of their teaching ability by saying things like, “But why trust the first set

of teaching evaluations and not the second?” and “Given the negative character of the second set, why are you so sure your teaching is that good?” and so on. In short, according to the Pragmatic Skeptic, we ought to object to the Overconfident Teacher in just the ways we are naturally inclined to.

It is also worth pointing out that—even though, according to the Pragmatic Skeptic, the Overconfident Teacher currently believes as they should—if they give up their belief (say, as the result of objections from others), it will no longer be the case that they ought, subjectively, to believe that they are an excellent teacher. Relative to their new beliefs, it is a very good thing that they gave up that belief. So they won’t regret having given it up, or wish that they hadn’t.

Note that the justification given by the Pragmatic Skeptic for objecting to the Overconfident Teacher does not translate into a justification for reacting in a similar way to the Pragmatic Skeptic. Most of us think the Pragmatic Skeptic is right about their basic ordinary beliefs, and better off having them, so we are not motivated to try to get them to change their mind. Moreover, even if we were, their beliefs do not exhibit the kinds of tensions found in the beliefs of the Overconfident Teacher, so the strategy of looking for tensions in their beliefs to make salient to them would not be open to us.

It is also worth noting that there’s very little risk that adopting the position of the Pragmatic Skeptic would make us more likely to display, in ordinary life, the kind of doxastic behavior exhibited by the Overconfident Teacher. As noted above, the fact is that creatures like us tend not to adopt combinations of beliefs that cohere badly with each other, and if we do, we’re likely to soon give them up. This is just as true of the Pragmatic Skeptic as it is of others.

Finally, I’ll note that the justification given here for objecting to the Overconfident Teacher is, of course, contingent and perspective-relative. For all that’s been said here, someone

who thinks the Overconfident Teacher is right may have no reason to object to them; and if the Overconfident Teacher is not moved by tensions in their beliefs, we may have no reason to point them out. But the Pragmatic Skeptic thinks that's just as it should be. Their explanation succeeds in accounting for the phenomenon they set out to explain: why it is that we, with the perspective we likely would have in such a situation, would rightly want to object to an Overconfident Teacher with the doxastic dispositions typical of creatures of our kind.

5. The Legacy of Skepticism

Berislav Marušić (2010) has argued that any tenable version of skepticism must avoid both *excessiveness* and *idleness*. A skeptical position is *idle* if it leaves no important mark on its defenders. Is Pragmatic Skepticism idle in this sense? Does the Pragmatic Skeptic differ in any significant or meaningful way from someone who has never encountered skepticism, or someone who has but who reacts differently to it?

I speculate that the Pragmatic Skeptic may be a less harsh judge of those with whom they disagree (for example, those with radically different religious or political views). In their more reflective moments, the Pragmatic Skeptic sees their own beliefs as no better supported by the evidence than the beliefs of those with whom they disagree. Moreover, it may be that those with different views are believing as they should, in the subjective sense: given what they believe, it's best if they continue to so believe. Many commonly-held sets of religious and political beliefs are self-affirming in this way (although it's not the case that *whatever* you believe, you should continue to believe it). So, when the Pragmatic Skeptic considers those with different views, they will see deep symmetries with their own position: both sets of beliefs are equally well supported by the evidence; neither is more rational than the other; neither constitutes knowledge;

neither party is failing to believe as they, in the subjective sense, should. Consequently, the Pragmatic Skeptic may lack the contempt and scorn that often accompanies accusations of failing to believe as one should, or failing to believe in accordance with the evidence. (My suggestion here is not that, in light of Evidential Skepticism, we *ought* to judge others less harshly (although this may also be true). Rather, the thought is that, given the kind of creatures we are, accepting Evidential Skepticism may, as a matter of fact, *dispose* us to view them less contemptuously. It is a descriptive, not a normative, claim.)

Of course, the Pragmatic Skeptic still thinks that those with whom they disagree are *mistaken*; that their beliefs are *false*. And it may be that these false beliefs concern deeply important matters, and the fact that people hold them may have grave and severe consequences for themselves and others. Consequently, the Pragmatic Skeptic will be motivated to try to get them to change their minds; or, failing that, to try to prevent them from acting on their beliefs, from convincing others of their beliefs, etc. And the Pragmatic Skeptic may think that, in the objective sense of “should” (relative to the facts), they should not have these beliefs. But one who fails to do what they *objectively* should do is not thereby blameworthy. So even though the Pragmatic Skeptic thinks that those with whom they disagree believe falsely, they may be more likely to view their false beliefs as a piece of tragic bad luck rather than a contemptible intellectual failing. If so, then one important feature of the Pragmatic Skeptic will be a more tempered appraisal of those with whom they disagree.

I am not alone in thinking that a properly skeptical position could have effects of roughly this kind. Similar remarks can be found in Hume, as well as, more recently, Marušić’s work. In the Enquiry, Hume speaks favorably of a “mitigated skepticism,” which, he hypothesizes, “would naturally inspire them with more modesty, and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion

of themselves and their prejudice against antagonists.” (p. 111) Similarly, Marušić (2010) hypothesizes that his moderate skepticism can “move us to eliminate dogmatic elements from our commitments” and thus “bring about intellectual catharsis.” (p. 79)

6. Pasnau’s Epistemic Defeatism

In a fascinating 2015 paper, Robert Pasnau proposes that we take seriously the possibility that the following claim, which he calls Epistemic Defeatism, is true: “In the final analysis, we have no good evidence for the truth of any proposition.” There may be superficial differences, but this Epistemic Defeatism is very much like the Evidential Skepticism discussed here. Pasnau notes, as I did above, that combining this view with Evidentialism would lead to the result that we ought to give up our beliefs. And, like the Pragmatic Skeptic, he thinks that, for this reason, Evidentialism should be rejected. However, Pasnau departs from the Pragmatic Skeptic in that he doesn’t endorse pragmatism about the ethics of belief. Instead, he considers two different ways of responding to Epistemic Defeatism, which he calls Faith and Hope.

Faith and Hope both involve believing while acknowledging that one has no evidence for the propositions believed. There are two main differences. First, Faith involves having high credence in the propositions believed, whereas Hope does not. Second, Hope has a distinctive affective component, namely, a lack of fear that the propositions believed are false. For reasons I’ll give shortly, Pasnau recommends Hope rather than Faith.

An immediate problem for the notion of Hope, which Pasnau himself raises and acknowledges, is that it requires making sense of the idea that one could believe without having high credence. Whether this is feasible depends on how credence is understood. My own inclination is to think of credence as level of confidence, and to think that part of what it is to

believe a proposition is to have a high level of confidence, and so a high credence, in it. (This does not require commitment to the claim that high confidence is sufficient for belief, just that it is necessary.) However, Pasnau does not think of credence in this way. His inclination is to think of both credence and belief in dispositional terms, but as involving different dispositions, so that it is possible for belief and high credence to come apart. Fleshing out the precise nature of the dispositions involved will be part of the future work of further developing the nature of Hope. It is an advantage of Pragmatic Skepticism, over Pasnau's Hope, that it does not involve a commitment to disentangle belief and high credence.

One reason that Pasnau is motivated to make sense of the notion of Hope, and to recommend it over Faith, is that Hope involves less of a deviation from Evidentialism. Whereas Faith involves having both credences and beliefs that fail to match the evidence, Hope involves having only beliefs that fail to match the evidence. (The credal state involved in Hope is to have no credence at all, which, according to Pasnau, is the credal state that matches the evidential state we're in according to Epistemic Defeatism.) The Pragmatic Skeptic, as a proponent of pragmatism about the ethics of belief, won't see increased conformity to Evidentialism as an advantage.

7. Conclusion

The Pragmatic Skeptic shows us that accepting Evidential Skepticism need not doom us to a choice between suspension of judgment, on the one hand, and beliefs that we shouldn't have, on the other. Moreover, we can embrace the conclusions of skeptical arguments without thereby succumbing to practical or intellectual paralysis, or facing a disaster of some other kind. This

takes the sting out of skepticism. Life can go on much as before—although we may be less harsh judges of those who disagree with us.

Pragmatic Skepticism has deep affinities with the approaches to skepticism found in the work of, among others, David Hume and William James, and, more recently, David Lewis and other contextualists, Berislav Marušić, and Robert Pasnau. But there are also important differences, and in my view going the way of the Pragmatic Skeptic has much to recommend it. Of course, in this paper I have only begun to develop and defend this position; there is much more work to be done. At the very least, though, I hope to have made the case that pragmatic responses to skepticism, which have been largely overlooked in recent decades, are deserving of further attention.

Acknowledgements:

For helpful comments and suggestions I am grateful to David Christensen, Sinan Dogramaci, Adam Elga, Hartry Field, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Andrew Graham, Krista Lawlor, Berislav Marušić, Kevin Meeker, Jennifer Nagel, Ram Neta, Robert Pasnau, Duncan Pritchard, Miriam Schoenfield, Crispin Wright, and audiences at the NYU Mind and Language Seminar Spring 2017, the Pacific APA 2018, and the Rutgers Epistemology Conference 2019.

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