Skepticism

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According to Diogenes Laertius, Pyrrho of Elis adopted "a most noble philosophy … taking the form of agnosticism and suspension of judgement." (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, IX.61) However, Diogenes offers an anecdote of Pyrrho related by Antigonus of Carystus that makes Pyrrho sound less than noble:

> He led a life consistent with this doctrine, going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not, and, generally, leaving nothing to the arbitrament of the senses; but he was kept out of harm's way by his friends who … used to follow close after him. (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, IX.61)

Of course, as Pyrrho would have reminded us, there are two sides to every story; a more sympathetic account, from the fellow skeptic Aenesidemus, has it that Pyrrho "did not lack foresight in his everyday acts." Setting aside the facts of Pyrrho's life, the conception of the skeptic as practically foolish has proved a durable idea, constituting the principal objection to skepticism throughout most of its history.

However, at least since Descartes made skeptical doubt the *modus operandi* of his philosophical meditations, we are familiar with the idea that skepticism may have something going for it, *despite* its conceded impracticality. Skepticism, in the Cartesian tradition, is something to be considered only when you have rid your mind of all worries and arranged for yourself a clear stretch of free time. The idea that our engagement with skepticism must be separated from

practice is shared both by those contemporary philosophers who, following Descartes, treat skepticism as a foil – as essentially a problem whose solution yields insight, as essentially a tool for making philosophical progress (compare LeMorvan 2011: 88) – and by those contemporary philosophers who are sympathetic to some form of skepticism – who conclude that we do not know much of what we ordinarily take ourselves to know (e.g. Unger 1975; Frances 2005). The objection that a skeptic would end up walking off a cliff is not discussed in contemporary epistemology, for we imagine the skeptic granting the impracticality of their position, insisting that skepticism is the rational conclusion to draw from a "purely intellectual point of view."

Historically, however, self-described skeptics have not gone this route. They have defended the practical wisdom of skepticism. With this in mind, in this chapter I will consider the idea that skepticism is an epistemic virtue. I'll consider three defenses of the value of skepticism (§§1-3), and offer an account of the virtue of skepticism (§4).

The expression "epistemic virtue," along with its cousin, "intellectual virtue," is ambiguous. In one sense, an "epistemic virtue" is anything that is both "epistemic" (in some sense to be explained) and a virtue. Consider, for example, an Aristotelian definition of intellectual virtue, on which an intellectual virtue is any virtue of the mind, i.e. an excellence of the intellectual part of the soul. In a different sense, an "epistemic virtue" is anything that is a "virtue" in a distinctively "epistemic" (and to-be-explained) sense of "virtue." Consider, for example, familiar contemporary definitions of epistemic virtue, on which an epistemic virtue is any personal quality that is conducive to the realization of knowledge, understanding, and other "epistemic goods."

Here I will employ the former disambiguation of "epistemic virtue." (However, I will have something to say about connections between skepticism and "epistemic goods," in §3.) Skepticism is an epistemic virtue, therefore, if and only if is both "epistemic" and a virtue. I will assume that the *epistemic* includes all and only what has essentially to do with the generation and sharing of information. And I will assume the following definition of *virtue*: a virtue is any admirable character trait. Skepticism is an epistemic virtue, then, if and only if it is epistemic, a character trait, and admirable.

It seems to me that any defense of skepticism as a virtue must defend the value of skepticism, by way of grounding or explaining why skepticism is admirable. So I'll turn now to the question of the value of skepticism. I'll consider three defenses of the value of skepticism: a Pyrrhonian defense (§1), a Cartesian defense (§2), and a liberal defense (§3)

1 The Pyrrhonian defense

Sextus Emipricus, in his influential explication of Pyrrhonian skepticism, defines skepticism as:

> an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquility. (*Outlines of Scepticism*, I.8, trans. J. Annas and J. Barnes.)

Note, first, that skepticism is defined an *ability* (compare Mates 1996: 7, on skepticism as an "*agôgê*, or way of life"). It is neither a view or theory (contrast e.g. so-called "Cartesian skepticism" in contemporary epistemology) nor a state or action (contrast e.g. suspension of judgment). And note, second, that skepticism aims at tranquility. "The causal principle

of skepticism … is the hope of becoming tranquil" (*Outlines*, I.12; see also I.26.): this is the skeptic's goal or purpose in being a skeptic. Their goal is neither the Cartesian goal of establishing something in the sciences that is stable and likely to last nor the goal of being rational, logical, tough-minded, or intellectually pure, come what may (compare Annas 1995: 205, on the Academic skeptics).

Let us grant the value of tranquility, i.e. (as Sextus explains it) freedom from disturbance or calmness of soul" (*Outlines,* I.10); alternative translations of the word he uses (*ataraxia*) include "peace of mind," "imperturbability," and "untroubledness." (Mates 1996: 61; Striker 1990: 97; Annas 1993: 209)[1] Given this assumption, if skepticism does lead to tranquility, we have a plausible explanation of the value of skepticism. But why think that skepticism leads to tranquility? Sextus offers two arguments.

The first is based on the idea that suspension of judgment can alleviate the upset caused by philosophical curiosity about what is real and what is merely apparent (*Outlines*, I.12, I.25-26, I.30). Suspension of judgment is said here to solve a very specific kind of problem: anxiety resulting from puzzling over the philosophical problem of distinguishing between appearance and reality. So, for all Sextus has said so far, there will still be bills to pay, headaches to endure, tyranny to suffer, and countless such troubles; and for those who are not kept up at night worrying about the appearance/reality distinction, this argument has nothing to offer (compare Mates 1996: 63).

Sextus' second argument is based on the idea that evaluative judgment is a source of anxiety:

[1] This is no trivial assumption, for you might think that tranquility is, in some situations, inappropriate, irrational, or unfitting – and, therefore, not valuable.

> [T]hose who hold the opinion that things are good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled. […] But those who make no determination about what is good and bad by nature neither avoid nor pursue anything with intensity; and hence they are tranquil. (*Outlines*, I.27-8; see also I.29-30, III.237-8, and *Against the Ethicists*, 110-67)

Even granting that pursuing things with intensity is problematic, this argument is unconvincing. We sometimes lack tranquility not because we are pursuing something with intensity, but simply because things are going badly for us. Explaining this argument, Myles Burnyeat (1998) says:

> If a tyrant sends a message that you and your family are to perish at dawn unless you commit some unspeakable deed, the true skeptic will be undisturbed … about whether it would be a good thing or a bad thing to comply with the command. (45)

Perhaps the skeptic will be undisturbed about that – they will suspend judgment about that, in any event – but that does not seem to mean that the skeptic will be undisturbed, full stop. What that would require, it seems to me, is for the skeptic to stop caring about their family, to be indifferent to their fate. But I don't think there is any reason to think that suspension of evaluative judgment would lead to such a state of cold indifference.[2] Indeed, Sextus seems to concede this point: the skeptic is forced to suffer disturbances such as cold and thirst (*Outlines*, I.29-30); perhaps anxiety about the tyrant's treat is just another such forced disturbance.

Elsewhere, however, Sextus offers a more promising defense of suspension of evaluative judgment. But evaluative judgment, Sextus argues, always makes the aforementioned

[2] For a related worry about this argument, see Mates, 1996: 63.

disturbances worse, adding to the original disturbance – the cold, the thirst, the anxiety – an additional disturbance, namely, the judgment that the original disturbance, or its cause, is bad (*Outlines*, I.30; *Ethicists*, 150-67). Thus suspension of evaluative judgment may not yield complete tranquility, but the skeptic "will bear the harsh situation more easily compared with the dogmatist," (*Ethicists,* 166; see also 150) as "[t]he disturbance which happens to the sceptic … is moderate and not so fearful." (*Ethicists*, 155) Thus skepticism can yield "moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us." (*Outlines*, I.25, I.30)[3] Although the thought that "nothing really matters" is often seen as a source of existential torment, the thought that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" can be, as Hamlet sarcastically reminds us, a source of comfort.

3 The Cartesian defense

Although Descartes is no skeptic, one of his lasting contributions to the history of philosophy is the use he makes of skeptical doubt in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. For Descartes, by contrast with the Pyrrhonian skeptics, the aim of doubt is theoretical: to find "something in the sciences that [is] stable and likely to last," (*Meditations* (trans. J. Cottingham), AT 17) i.e. *scientia*, which he identifies elsewhere as "certain and evident cognition," (*Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence* (trans. Dugald Murdoch), AT 362) and his evident interest in error-avoidance– is instrumental vis-à-vis his ultimate aim of *scientia*. The idea I want to take away from Descartes here is the idea of the utility of suspension of judgment vis-à-vis so-called "epistemic" goods, perhaps including, but not limited to, *scientia.* Along similar lines, Pierre

[3] Compare the story (Diogenes, *Lives*, IX.68) of Pyrrho's relative calm during a violent storm at sea.

LeMorvan (2011) writes that "we will conceive of skepticism as playing the fundamental role of a *doxastic* immune system that protects the mind from false (or unjustified) beliefs." (91)

The most straightforward thing that suspension of judgment is good for is avoiding erroneous judgment.[4] Suspension of judgment might be instrumental vis-à-vis your acquisition of knowledge, but it might *constitute* your avoidance of error. And you might not value error-avoidance only as a means to knowledge; avoiding error might be something that you care about for its own sake. Error-avoidance thus deserves to be counted among the "epistemic" goods.

"Cartesian skepticism" in contemporary epistemology is standardly identified not with suspension of judgment but with the view that knowledge of the external world is impossible. However, like suspension of judgment, knowing that knowledge in impossible in some domain can be useful vis-à-vis so-called "epistemic" goods. Knowing that knowledge is impossible in some domain is conducive to intellectual caution, either in the form of a limitation of the scope of your inquiry (e.g. avoiding inquiry in the domain in which knowledge is impossible) or in the form of a moderation of the aims of your inquiry (e.g. setting your sights on reasonable opinion, rather than on knowledge).[5]

Although the impossibility of knowledge in some domain may speak against inquiry in that domain, the attribution of knowledge of some proposition seems to preclude inquiry about whether that proposition is true. In this sense, knowledge attributions serve to close inquiry, in the sense that it is irrational to genuinely inquire about whether p – as opposed to pretending to inquire, going through the motions, or doing *pro forma* checks – if you believe that you know

[4] N.b. the possibility of other species of error, e.g. misunderstanding, desire for the bad, etc.
[5] Whether this is possible depends on whether reasonable belief that falls short of knowledge is possible; see Williamson 2000: 47, 255-6; Huemer 2011; Hazlett 2014, §9.1; 2016, §5.1

that p – or indeed that anyone knows that p (compare Kvanvig 2009: 344-5; Kappel 2010; Kelp 2011; Millar 2011; Rysiew 2012; Hannon 2015, §3; Hazlett 2016, §4.1).[6] Refraining from attributing knowledge that p may thus serve to prevent premature closure of inquiry, including not only cases of inquiry that yields a false belief but also at least some cases of inquiry that yields a true belief that does not amount to knowledge.

2.3 The liberal defense

In the final section of his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Hume sympathetically articulates what he calls "*mitigated* scepticism or *academical* philosophy," which he claims "may be both durable and useful," (*Enquiry*, 129) by contrast with Pyrrhonian skepticism, from which no "durable good or benefit to society could ever be expected to result." (Enquiry,128) Hume defends this claim by appeal to two problems, to both of which skepticism is the solution: our tendency to dogmatism and close-mindedness, on the one hand, and our tendency to inquire about matters beyond the scope of human knowledge, on the other (*Enquiry*, 129; see also Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, Chapter I, §7; see also §§4–6). These two problems are (it seems to me) related: the confinement of inquiry within the scope of human knowledge is a means to the end of avoiding dogmatism and close-mindedness, in as much as our speculations outside of the domain of "daily practice and experience" are those about which we are most likely to be dogmatic and close-minded.

[6] Note that the claim is *not* that it is irrational to inquire about why p – or to engage in any other inquiry, other than inquiry about whether p – if you believe that you know that p.

What, exactly, is the value of avoiding dogmatism and close-mindedness? Two answer this question, I want to consider two virtues for participants in liberal political discourse: political moderation and intellectual independence.

Consider, first, political moderation: "a willingness to see the limits of one's own opinions and search for value in others," as Miriam McCormick (2013: 91) describes it, and which Hume sympathetically contrasts with faction, party zeal, extremism, prejudice, and enthusiasm.[7] Hume's mitigated skeptic will hold no political position dogmatically and be open-minded in their engagement with alternative positions, which makes them a poor candidate for membership of a political party.

Political moderation is valuable vis-à-vis liberal political discourse in at least two ways. First, some degree of humility about your political views and some degree of respect for the political views of your potential interlocutors is required for you to be motivated to engage in conversation about political questions at all – think here, by way of contrast, of one cliché of American Thanksgiving dinners, the awkward silence when politics comes up. Second, humility about your political views and respect for the political views of others is conducive, other things being equal, to high-quality conversation about political questions, of the kind constitutive of what Rawls called a space of public reason – think here, by way of contrast, of another cliché of American Thanksgiving dinners, the vulgar and uncivil fight about politics. What makes conversation among moderates of a higher quality? Among other things, the positions adopted by moderates often represent a compromise between two extreme positions, each of which has

[7] See also Benjamin Franklin's defense of intellectual humility in his *Autobiography* (Franklin 2008: 94; see also 18, 61), Bertrand Russell's "The Need for Political Scepticism" (Russell 1996, Essay 11), and Pierre LeMorvan's (2011: 94) description of the "Petit Pris Partisan."

some truth to it. As Mill points out in his argument against censorship, even a false opinion "may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth." (*On Liberty*, Chapter 2). When this is true of two opposed extreme political positions, it is the centrists who, as Hume says, "are most likely to meet with truth and certainty." In any event, given the value of political moderation, Hume's idea, which seems right, is that mitigated skepticism is valuable, too, as a means to that end.

Political immoderation can be caused by, among other things, two common psychological dispositions. First, consider our tendency to have a *desire for certainty* (Kruglanski et al. 1993, Webster et al. 1994). We are disposed to find uncertainty to be an uneasy state, as Hume puts it, from which we are impatient to escape. Second, consider our tendency for *belief polarization* (Kelly 2008). Exposure to disagreement, including arguments and evidence that we are wrong, tends to make us more confident that we are right. Political entrenchment is, in part, a symptom of this disposition.[8] Whether they are innate, either part of our human nature or flowing from native individual differences, or acquired, on account of culture and experience, liberal political discourse requires tool to manage and mitigate these dispositions; Hume's plausible suggestion is that mitigated skepticism is one such tool.

The defense of political moderation suggests its proper limits. If there are political questions about which it is not worth engaging in conversation – positions which, perhaps, enjoy not even a portion of truth – then moderation vis-à-vis such questions will not be valuable in the way suggested. If there are political views that do not belong in the space of public reason, then

[8] Compare a related but distinct kind of "polarization," in which political partisans move "further part" in their views, where the content of their positions is changing, not merely their confidence in their positions.

moderation vis-à-vis such positions will not be valuable in the way suggested. My proposal here leaves open the possibility that certain people and ideas are not worthy of critical engagement; such a possibility represents the boundary of liberal political discourse, beyond which lies direct action and resistance, in both their nonviolent and violent forms.

Consider, second, intellectual independence, understood as an aversion, at least an other-things-being-equal aversion, but perhaps a stronger aversion, to deference.[9] That there is a connection between intellectual independence and mitigated skepticism derives from the fact that deference can amount to a kind of politically problematic dogmatism and close-mindedness. When a source of information is treated as providing decisive or conclusive evidence vis-à-vis whether some proposition is true, in the manner of an oracle or guru, the possibility of liberal political discourse – for which criticism, discussion, and debate are necessary – is precluded. But even when deference is not so extreme, when participants are *too* deferential to some source of information, the quality of liberal political discourse is diminished.

How deferential is "too" deferential? We know excessive deference when we see it: Americans were too deferential, in 2003, when they believed Secretary of State Colin Powell and the *New York Times* that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I do not just mean that there turned out not to be any such weapons, but that Americans were not critical enough of the claim that there were and of the arguments for that claim. We were not, as we sometimes like to think, taken in by some grand deception concocted by corrupt politicians: the evidence was insufficient

[9] E.g. a preference for non-deferential belief to deferential belief (Hazlett 2016a).

on its face, for anyone with a skeptical disposition. As this case illustrates, excessive deference to institutional sources of information – the state, the media – is politically dangerous.[10]

Deference is not an all-or-nothing affair; there can be differences in the both the quality and the quantity of your deference to a source of information. Consider the difference between believing what some source of information says (more deferential) and accepting what that source says for the purposes of practical reasoning in a particular situation or context (less deferential), believing everything some source of information says (more deferential) and believing some but not all of what that source says (less deferential), and believing what some source of information says (more deferential) and believing what some source of information says whilst requesting evidence, arguments, and explanations to back it up (less deferential).

However, you might worry that there is a negative side to intellectual independence. As I write this, citizens in (at least until recently) liberal democracies are thought to be increasingly skeptical of expert testimony. In the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum on EU membership, for example, there was broad agreement among many Leave voters that professional economists, who predicted that Brexit would be economically bad for the UK, were not to be trusted. For many people, "expert" is now a kind of pejorative; populist politicians are supported *because* their policies are rejected by experts. However, this "skepticism about expertise" has crippled public discourse whenever it has arisen. Isn't this intellectual independence run amok? Doesn't this speak against the utility of mitigated skepticism? No, for "skepticism about expertise" is a

[10] Recall here a saying popularly attributed to Franklin: "Distrust and caution are the parents of security." For further discussion of this theme, see Sunstein 2003.

manifestation neither of intellectual independence nor of mitigated skepticism, for two (related) reasons.

First, "skepticism about expertise" is more charitably interpreted as simply dissent about who the experts are. US Senator Ben Sasse recently criticized the "monopolistic rule of experts" favored by his political opponents, saying:

> The way for conservatives to approach the public is to first ask people, 'How do you think problems get solved? Is it by putting power in the hands of experts who have the answers or is it by putting resources in the hands of people who need solutions?' (quoted in Malone 2016)

But it is clear that what Sasse thinks is that the experts do not really have the answers they purport to have – if they did, surely those answers would be useful vis-à-vis solutions to problems – in other words, that they are not really experts at all. Like the undergraduate who "rejects morality," meaning some conventional or traditional set of moral rules or values, the "skeptic about expertise" rejects the testimony of (those they take to be) so-called "experts," not (those they take to be) genuine experts. But that, per se, is no manifestation of intellectual independence.

Second, "skepticism about expertise" involves doubt about what experts say, but this doubt is typically coupled with a dogmatic acceptance of what some other source of information says. Brexit voters did not cautiously suspend judgment about the economic effects of leaving the EU, having found the arguments unconvincing; they slavishly believed what British Euroskeptic politicians told them to believe (which is not to say that Remain voters were not equally slavish in their beliefs). "Skepticism about expertise" – the thing that seems to be on the rise in recent

years – manifests not intellectual independence, but a particular form of selective deference, namely, deference to sources of information other than institutionally-sanctioned experts. This was a notable feature of the strain of illiberal populism that played a decisive role in the 2016 United States Presidential election: the rejection of the testimony of "establishment" politicians and "the mainstream media" was combined, by many voters, with a decidedly slavish deference to the testimony of "outsider" politicians and "alternative" sources of news and information.

This second point applies, mutatis mutandis, to the would-be "skepticism" of conspiracy theorists (compare LeMorvan 2011: 94). The conspiracy theorist rejects various sources of information, namely, those which agree with the "official narrative" about some event or state of affairs, on the grounds that those sources have been corrupted by the theorized conspiracy. But their deference to "alternative" sources of information, rather than to the "mainstream media," makes them no less intellectually independent than anyone else. (Indeed, "skepticism about expertise" can perhaps best be understood as a species of conspiracy theory – it is hard to see how the institutionally-sanctioned experts could be so untrustworthy if there were not something like a conspiracy afoot. That is the argument of so-called "climate change skeptics" when it comes to the scientists who study climate change.) The appeal of conspiracy theories comes, in part, from their promise to free you from your intellectual dependence on other people – to have your eyes opened, to have the curtain pulled back, and to see the truth that lies behind all the lies. But, of course, you will not *see* the truth of the conspiracy theory – you will read about it on some website, you will have it described to you by someone at a bar, or your favorite politician will shout it to you at a rally. In any event, conspiracy theorists do not manifest intellectual independence.

Finally, it is worth noting that conspiracy theorists also do not manifest political moderation. They are decidedly not willing to see the limits of their own opinions and to search for value in others – for it is essential to a conspiracy theory that it predicts and explains the existence of (misleading) evidence against it. Objections and alternative views are therefore seen as part of the conspiracy – indeed as evidence for its existence – and not suitable for critical engagement. Dogmatism and close-mindedness are thus built into the logic of the conspiracy theory. (My critique here is effectively the same as Popper's: that they are unfalsifiable makes conspiracy theories unsuitable as subjects of liberal political discourse.) As with intellectual independence, the appeal of conspiracy theories derives, in part, from the appeal of skepticism and open-mindedness, as opposed to dogmatism and close-mindedness. But just as the orthodox are committed to their view, on which there is no conspiracy, conspiracy theorists are committed to their view, on which there is – on which Barack Obama is a Muslim, or on which Hillary Clinton neglected Benghazi, or on which the economy is "rigged." And unlike the orthodox, who can coherently critically engage with objections and alternative views, conspiracy theorists have dogmatism and close-mindedness built into their position. They therefore do not manifest political moderation.

3 The virtue of skepticism

We have considered three defenses of the value of skepticism (§§1-3). This puts us in a position to articulate an account of skepticism as an epistemic virtue. Given our predicative disambiguation of "epistemic virtue," to defend the idea that skepticism is an epistemic virtue, we need to articulate an account of skepticism on which (i) skepticism is "epistemic," (ii) skepticism is a character trait, and (iii) skepticism is admirable.

I shall begin by assuming that virtues are excellences, such that the schematic form of a virtue is <excellence in φing>, which we can cash out with an Aristotelian formulation: excellence in φing is the character trait comprising the disposition to φ at the right time and in the right way.[11] Thus every virtue (excellence in φing) is associated with a characteristic activity (φing). Other accounts of virtue are possible; I leave open whether they have the resources to understand skepticism as an epistemic virtue.

With which characteristic activity should we associate the virtue of skepticism? I propose that *attributing ignorance* is skepticism's characteristic activity. "Attribution" can be either mental (e.g. believing that someone does not know something) or linguistic (e.g. saying that someone does not know something), and "ignorance" comprises various species of lack, including e.g. not knowing some proposition, not being knowledgeable about some field or area or topic, and not understanding some phenomenon. (On the present account, the "object" of skepticism is neither a person nor proposition, but a person-proposition pair.) Skepticism is therefore manifested either by what I have elsewhere called your "higher-order epistemic attitudes" (Hazlett 2012) or by what we can call your "higher-order epistemic assertions"; it is manifested not (in general) by what you believe or say, but (specifically) by what you believe or say *about* what is believed (either by you or by others). Contrast the account implied by LeMorvan (2011: 97; see also Kelly 2011 on "following the argument where it leads."), where skepticism is manifested by doubt about a claim, refusal to accept a theory, and refraining from judgment.

[11] Both excellence and individual excellences come in degrees; given the present assumption, this entails that both virtue and individual virtues come in degrees, which seems right – people are more or less virtuous, more or less courageous, more or less openminded, and so on. This as yet says nothing about the threshold for the attribution of virtue and for the attribution of individual virtues.

Thus our definition: *skepticism* is excellence in attributing ignorance (compare Hazlett 2016). Recall our three tasks: we need to show (i) that skepticism is epistemic, (ii) that skepticism is a character trait, and (iii) that skepticism is admirable.

First, that skepticism is epistemic. Recall the assumption (§1) that the epistemic includes all and only what has essentially to do with the generation and sharing of information. Excellence in attributing ignorance clearly meets this condition. So skepticism is epistemic.

You might object that epistemic virtues are essentially those qualities that are manifested in instances of knowing, and that knowledge never manifests skepticism, as defined here. I reply that that is simply a different concept of "epistemic virtue" than the concept I am employing in this chapter. Given that concept, open-mindedness and intellectual humility are not epistemic virtues, either. What we have are two concepts of "epistemic virtue," one suited for a virtue-theoretic analysis of knowledge, on which knowledge is the manifestation of epistemic virtue, and another suited for a discussion, like the present discussion, of what is good and bad in the intellectual domain.[12]

Second, that skepticism is a character trait. Given our definition of an excellence (above), this follows trivially.[13] But it is worth noting that "skeptic" has a characterological meaning in contemporary English; as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, "skeptic" may refer to "one who is habitually inclined rather to doubt than to believe any assertion or apparent fact that comes before him," i.e. "a person of skeptical temper." (We may be put off by the "ism" in

[12] Compare the supposed disagreement between "reliabilists" and "responsibilists" in virtue epistemology (Code 1987, Chapter 3).
[13] LeMorvan (2011) defines skepticism as an "attitude" (91), but later (and more in line with his discussion) says that it is "an acquired disposition or trait." (93)

"skepticism," but character traits can have names that end in "ism," like optimism and pessimism.) So we are within our rights to use "skepticism" as the name for a character trait.

Third, that skepticism is admirable. There is again a sense in which this is trivial, given our definition – skepticism is an excellence; excellences are admirable; therefore, skepticism is admirable. But what we can do here is point to the defenses of skepticism articulated in §2, above. The Pyrrhonian, Cartesian, and liberal defenses of skepticism described what is good about skepticism, why it is admirable, or at least why those of us who admire it do admire it.

I conclude that skepticism is a virtue, i.e. that there is a virtue of skepticism, which is excellence in attributing ignorance. The assumption that virtues are excellences allows us to follow Aristotle in thinking of virtues are means between two vicious extremes, one a vice of deficiency and the other a vice of excess (compare LeMorvan 2011: 92). We can thus understand the virtue of skepticism as a mean between the vice of *dogmatism* – characterized by *insufficient* attribution of ignorance – and the vice of *quietism* – characterized by *excessive* attribution of ignorance. Moreover, the assumption that virtues are excellences means that we need not qualify our praise for skepticism by naming our virtue "proper skepticism" or "healthy skepticism" (LeMorvan 2011). Saying "the virtue of skepticism" is enough. In the same sense that there is improper or unhealthy skepticism, there is improper or unhealthy courage, e.g. rashly charging into a pointless and ignoble battle; but "courage" is the name of a virtue, not "proper courage" or "healthy courage." You might object that rashly charging into a pointless and ignoble battle would not manifest the *virtue* of courage, but that is exactly the point: neither would instances of improper or unhealthy skepticism manifest the *virtue* of skepticism.

Why favor the present account, on which skepticism is manifested by your higher-order epistemic attitudes and assertions, to an account on which skepticism is manifested by your first-order attitudes and assertions – e.g. by your (first-order) beliefs and other (first-order) doxastic attitudes? The present account is, of course, consistent with the claim that there is a virtue comprising excellence in forming (first-order) beliefs, and it would be a mistake to argue about which of these virtues most deserves the name "skepticism." There is no disagreement between the defender of the view that excellence in φing is a virtue and the defender of the view that excellence in ψing is a virtue; these are not competing accounts of some one thing, but compatible accounts of two different things.

How is skepticism related to other seemingly similar virtues, such as intellectual humility and open-mindedness? It would be a mistake to assume that for each of these labels – "skepticism," "intellectual humility," "open-mindedness" – there is necessarily some distinct thing that a correct philosophical account would capture. Virtue epistemology, it seems to me, should not be in the business of conceptual analysis. Elsewhere (2016, §3), I propose a conception of the virtue of skepticism on which intellectual humility is a proper *part* of skepticism: attributing ignorance to *yourself* manifests intellectual humility, but attributing ignorance to *others* does not. However, definitions of individual virtues are, at least typically and in paradigm cases, partly stipulative. We could have called the virtue of skepticism something else, and there are other virtues we could have called "skepticism." Moreover, to the extent that intellectual humility and open-mindedness are distinct from the virtue of skepticism, these three (perhaps among others) are clearly consonant with each other: it would be natural to expect them to come together, to mutually support one another, and so on.

4 Conclusion

I have sympathetically discussed the idea that skepticism is an epistemic virtue. The conception of skepticism as a useful character trait that emerges from this discussion contrasts with two familiar ideas, both of which we inherit from Descartes' use of skepticism in the *Meditations*: that skepticism is essentially a problem to be solved and that skepticism is fundamentally impractical. The alternative sketched here is worth considering, in no small part because it jibes with the accounts of skepticism offered by self-described skeptics in the history of philosophy.

Related topics

On epistemic virtues seemingly consonant with the virtue of skepticism (§4), see the chapters on OPEN-MINDEDNESS and EPISTEMIC HUMILITY. On the value of intellectual independence (§3), compare the chapter on EPISTEMIC DEFERENCE. On the characterization of epistemic virtues as admirable ("epistemic") character traits (§1), compare the chapter on EPISTEMIC VIRTUES AS PRAISEWORTHY CHARACTER TRAITS.

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