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Neo-Pyrrhonism

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1. Introduction

Classical Pyrrhonian skepticism had a practical side: the skeptics tried to attain tranquility by suspending beliefs. David Hume (1975: 160) famously attacks this form of skepticism thus: (1) life without beliefs is psychologically impossible, and (2) even if it were possible, life would be very short because intentional action is not possible without beliefs. Assuming Hume is right, it is no surprise that there have not been many Pyrrhonian skeptics.

It is also a common interpretation that classical Pyrrhonism is based on the equal plausibility of conflicting or contrary propositions. When we find such sets of propositions, it is psychologically impossible for us to believe one of them rather than the other, and we are forced to suspend belief. However, if Hume is right, there cannot be many such conflicts, and therefore classical Pyrrhonism does not offer a serious skeptical challenge to our beliefs.

This seems to be a widespread diagnosis of classical Pyrrhonism among contemporary epistemologists. It explains why they have been more interested in Cartesian skepticism, which appears to raise more interesting skeptical problems. However, there are a few philosophers who think that we should take Pyrrhonism more seriously, and that it should even be accepted. When it is properly understood, we can see that there have even been actual and, indeed, very influential Pyrrhonian skeptics such as Michel de Montaigne, Hume himself, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and, among contemporary philosophers, Robert Fogelin and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. We cannot say the same of Cartesian skepticism (Sinnott-Armstrong 2004a: 4).

How, then, should we understand Pyrrhonism? What constitutes updated Pyrrhonism, or neo-Pyrrhonism? Fogelin (1994: 5–10), who is the main contemporary advocate, restricts the scope of skepticism to philosophical and perhaps other theoretical matters. Here he follows Michael Frede's interpretation of classical Pyrrhonism: it is directed at the dogmatic beliefs of professors rather than the common beliefs of ordinary people. In the taxonomy proposed by Jonathan Barnes (1997: 60–62), Fogelin's neo-Pyrrhonism is a form of urbane Pyrrhonism that suspends beliefs

about philosophy, rather than a form of rustic Pyrrhonism that suspends all beliefs. This sort of Pyrrhonism avoids Hume's worries: we can surely live without philosophical beliefs.

Another important feature of Fogelin's neo-Pyrrhonism is that it arises from philosophy: it is skepticism about philosophy, based on philosophical arguments. Philosophical reflection on ordinary epistemic practices leads us to deny the possibility of knowledge and justified belief. However, a neo-Pyrrhonian skeptic does not conclude that we cannot have knowledge or justified beliefs, which would be negative dogmatism. Neither does she reject ordinary epistemic practices: she rejects the philosophical reflection that leads to the impasse (Fogelin 1994: 3–4). So Fogelin's neo-Pyrrhonism is based on a reductio ad absurdum of epistemology: because the epistemological enterprise leads to dogmatic skepticism, it should be rejected.

This sort of neo-Pyrrhonism avoids the problems raised by Hume. Indeed, in Fogelin's view, Hume himself was such a Pyrrhonist. In this chapter, I concentrate on Fogelin's neo-Pyrrhonism and evaluate its plausibility. Does epistemology, when seriously pursued, destroy knowledge, as Fogelin (2004: 164) argues? This depends very much on the philosophical argument that is supposed to show that knowledge is impossible and that he takes to be a reductio of its philosophical premises. Unfortunately, it is not so clear what the argument is. Fogelin never formulates it explicitly. He suggests that it derives from the so-called Five Modes of Agrippa, but it is not easy to interpret these modes. I will formulate two different versions of the Agrippan argument and consider whether either of them supports the neo-Pyrrhonian moral. But let us first take a look at the moral itself.

2. Fogelin's Neo-Pyrrhonism

Fogelin argues in the second part of his book Pyrrhonian Reflection on Knowledge and Justification that Agrippa's problem arises from philosophical reflection on our ordinary epistemic practices and that the theories of justification he considers cannot solve it. The result is a kind of urbane Pyrrhonism that combines "philosophical skepticism with skepticism about philosophy, that is, to have doubts about philosophy on the basis of philosophical arguments" (1994: 3).

In order to explain how Agrippa's problem arises from our ordinary epistemic practices, Fogelin gives the following account of knowledge attributions:

> "S knows that p" means that "S justifiably believes that p on the grounds that establish the truth of p." (Fogelin 1994: 94; 1997: 417)

Although this is what we say when we make knowledge attributions, as Fogelin (1994: 91–93) points out, we often make serious knowledge attributions in the face of error-possibilities that the grounds do not exclude. We simply ignore these possibilities, or "rely on the grace of nature not to defeat us." However, if we dwell on them, the level of scrutiny will rise and we will no longer be ready to attribute knowledge—indeed we will be inclined to deny it.[1]

Thus, our ordinary practice of knowledge attribution involves procedures for invoking higher levels of scrutiny that lead us to deny knowledge. When we allow the level of scrutiny to rise without restriction, we are inclined to say that nothing is known. According to Fogelin's interpretation of Pyrrhonism, a Pyrrhonian skeptic will go along with these different levels and attribute knowledge when the level is low and deny knowledge when it is high. She will just report how things strike her without privileging any particular level.

However, in Fogelin's view, epistemologists have not been happy with this sort of Pyrrhonism. They have sought to propose theories of justification to remedy the fragility of our ordinary epistemic practices:

> I hold that the theory of knowledge, in its traditional form, has been an attempt to find ways of establishing knowledge claims from a perspective where the level of scrutiny has been heightened by reflection alone. (Fogelin 1994: 99)

Unfortunately, this attempt fails because it falls into the Modes of Agrippa. Indeed, "the epistemological enterprise, when relentlessly pursued, not only fails in its efforts, but also Samson-like, brings down the entire edifice of knowledge around it" (Fogelin 2004: 164). Thus, traditional epistemology destroys knowledge: it leads inevitably to the conclusion that nothing is known or that no beliefs are justified. We can take this to be a reductio ad absurdum of the epistemological enterprise, which should therefore be discarded. We should become Pyrrhonists—or neo-Pyrrhonists—who go on making knowledge claims about ordinary matters but suspend belief about epistemology.

Before deciding whether Fogelin succeeds in showing that the epistemological enterprise fails because it leads to dogmatic skepticism, let us consider the question of whether Fogelin's neo-Pyrrhonism itself is coherent by examining Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's neo-Pyrrhonism.

3. Sinnott-Armstong's Neo-Pyrrhonism

Sinnott-Armstrong (2004b: 188–189) expresses puzzlement about Fogelin's attitude to ordinary knowledge attributions. On the one hand, Fogelin (1994: 10, 88) supposes that Pyrrhonism leaves

ordinary beliefs untouched, including epistemic beliefs about whether somebody knows something, but on the other hand he states that, "in making knowledge claims, we always (or almost always) assert more than we have a right to assert" (1994: 94). When the cost of being wrong is low, we make knowledge attributions in the face of uneliminated error-possibilities, but when the cost becomes excessive or we dwell on those error-possibilities, we deny knowledge and even assert that nobody knows anything.

Fogelin's Pyrrhonist seems to be self-contradicting, saying both that somebody knows something and that nobody knows anything. Both assertions cannot be true. Sinnott-Armstrong tries to reconcile these claims by appealing to contrastivism. According to Sinnott-Armstrong, justification is not a binary relation between a subject and a proposition but a ternary relation between a subject, a proposition, and a contrast class:

> Someone, S, is justified in believing a proposition, P, out of a contrast class, C, when and only when S has grounds that rule out any other member of C but do not rule out P. (2004b: 190)

A contrast class is composed of propositions that are contrary to each other. We are justified in believing one of these propositions just in case it is the only member of the set that is left uneliminated by our grounds. Suppose, for example, that a father takes his daughter to the zoo and looks at a zebra in a cage. His sensory experience rules out the possibility that the animal is an antelope but does not rule out the possibility that it is a cleverly painted mule. The father is therefore justified in believing that he sees a zebra rather than an antelope, but he is not justified in believing that he sees a zebra rather than a painted mule.

In order to reconcile Fogelin's apparently conflicting claims, Sinnott-Armstrong (2004b: 190) distinguishes three contrast classes that correspond to Fogelin's three levels of doubt:

> The <u>unlimited contrast class</u> for P = all propositions contrary to P, including skeptical scenarios that are systematically ineliminable.

> The <u>extreme contrast class</u> for P = all propositions contrary to P that could be eliminated in some way, even if doing so is not needed in order to meet normal standards.

> The <u>everyday contrast class</u> for P = all propositions contrary to P that could be eliminated and need to be eliminated in order to meet normal standards.

We can now make sense of Fogelin's apparently conflicting attributions and denials of knowledge. They can all be true if we understand him as saying that, although we are typically justified in believing things out of everyday contrast classes, we are not justified in believing anything out of extreme and unlimited contrast classes.

However, according to Sinnott-Armstrong (2004b: 193), it is problematic to understand our unqualified knowledge attributions in this way. The linguistic meaning (or Kaplan's character) of the sentences of the form "S is justified in believing that p" should be represented as:

S is justified out of the relevant contrast class in believing that p.

This is also what makes our attributions of justification normative: to call a contrast class relevant is to say that the believer needs to rule out all other members of the class in order to be justified in believing one of them. According to Sinnott-Armstrong (2004b: 193–202), such normative epistemic judgments are suspect because nobody has found plausible rules for relevance. Indeed, he suggests that a Pyrrhonian skeptic suspends judgment about all normative matters and instead makes judgments of the forms:

S is justified out of the everyday contrast class in believing that p.

Nobody is justified out of the extreme contrast class in believing that p.

These judgments are quite compatible and purely descriptive.[2] According to Sinnott-Armstrong's version of neo-Pyrrhonism, a Pyrrhonist is allowed to make such judgments and suspends judgment only about normative and philosophical matters.

Although Sinnott-Armstrong's view reconciles the apparently contradictory knowledge attributions and denials of Fogelin's neo-Pyrrhonist, it is in conflict with the spirit of Fogelin's neo-Pyrrhonism, which leaves our ordinary epistemic practices untouched and allows the Pyrrhonist ordinary epistemic judgments. According to Sinnott-Armstrong, our ordinary epistemic judgments presuppose something that is false or at least suspect, namely, that there are relevant contrast classes. This is why purely descriptive claims should replace them. Fogelin's version of neo-Pyrrhonism is preferable. It is much harder for Sinnott-Armstrong's skeptic to avoid all philosophical commitments because she needs some reasons to revise our ordinary epistemic practices, and it is hard to see how such reasons could be anything other than philosophical.

It seems that contextualism offers a better way of reconciling the neo-Pyrrhonist's apparently conflicting knowledge attributions. It saves our ordinary epistemic judgments, as Sinnott-Armstrong understands them, by making the relevance of the contrast class dependent on the attributor's context. When the stakes are low for us and we ignore all uneliminated error-possibilities, our knowledge attributions are true, but when the stakes grow higher and we dwell on some uneliminated error-possibilities, our knowledge denials are also true. There is no contradiction, because our knowledge attributions and denials express relations to different contrast classes. Although Fogelin denies contextualism in the book, he acknowledges in a more recent paper, "The Skeptics are Coming! The Skeptics are Coming!" (2004) that it would be one version of neo-Pyrrhonism.

4. The Structural Regress Problem or Agrippa's Trilemma

How, then, does epistemology destroy knowledge? Fogelin argues that the theories of justification that are put forth to remedy the fragility of our ordinary epistemic procedures disappoint us because they fail to solve Agrippa's problem, and this failure will "bring down the whole edifice of knowledge" (2004: 164). What, exactly, is Agrippa's problem?

Fogelin (1994: 114) considers the common reference to Agrippa's problem as the infinite regress problem misleading, because a philosophical theory of justification must avoid involvement not only with infinite regress but also with vicious circularity and an appeal to arbitrary assumption (or hypothesis). The problem is rather a trilemma: how can one avoid all three bad options?

According to Fogelin (1994: 114–115, 120–121), Agrippa's trilemma constitutes a serious philosophical challenge only if we make two assumptions. The first of these is the normative principle of epistemic justification, which W. K. Clifford expresses thus: "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." As Fogelin interprets it, the principle says roughly that epistemic justification is a matter of responsibility, and that responsibility requires that we base our beliefs on good reasons (or grounds). The second assumption is that we have or could have knowledge and justified beliefs.

Together these assumptions entail that we have knowledge that conforms to Cliffordian standards. The task of a theory of justification is to explain how this is possible. Thus, it seems clear that Fogelin sees the problem as a paradox. In assuming the Cliffordian principle, we must face Agrippa's trilemma with its three bad options, none of which can make beliefs justified. Yet, we believe that we do have justified beliefs.

To be more precise, the paradox arises through the formulation of a valid skeptical argument leading to the conclusion that there are no justified beliefs, and then denying the conclusion. The argument seems to be this (cf. Comesaña 2005):

(S1) If a belief is justified, it is either a basic belief (justified independently of reasoning) or an inferentially justified belief.
(S2) There are no basic beliefs.
(S3) If a belief is justified, it is made justified either by (a) an infinite chain of reasons, (b) a circular chain of reasons, or (c) a chain of reasons terminating in an unjustified belief.
(S4) No belief is made justified by an infinite chain of reasons.
(S5) No belief is made justified by a circular chain of reasons.
(S6) No belief is made justified by a chain of reasons terminating in an unjustified belief.
(S7) Thus there are no justified beliefs.

This is a valid argument: the subsidiary conclusion S3 follows from premises S1 and S2, and then the final conclusion S7 follows from premises S3, S4, S5, and S6. Whereas premises S2 and S6 derive from the Agrippan mode of hypothesis, premises S4 and S5 derive from the modes of infinity and circularity.

Theories of justification offer different responses to this argument: foundationalism (including holistic coherentism[3]) rejects premise S2, infinitism rejects premise S4, circular (or linear) coherentism rejects premise S5, and Wittgensteinian contextualism rejects premise S6. Fogelin (1994: 117) lists the same options for the dogmatic epistemologist, except infinitism, which he takes to be hopeless.

Why, then, should all these attempts at responding to the argument fail? One would expect it to follow from Cliffordism that all premises of the argument are true, which is why Cliffordism leads to dogmatic skepticism. This would happen if the principle stated that only justified beliefs could serve as reasons or evidence. In that case every justified belief must be based on other justified beliefs, which in turn must be based on other justified beliefs, and so on. This would rule out foundationalism, which the majority of epistemologists take to be the most plausible solution to the paradox, and thus leaves us with the three bad options.

The problem with this interpretation of Cliffordism, as Michael Williams (1999: 147) points out, is that the argument merely shows that the Cliffordian principle is too strong and should therefore be rejected. It does not show that the whole epistemological enterprise fails. Indeed, Fogelin (1994: 116–117) does not think that Cliffordism rules out foundationalism. He sees Paul

Moser as a Cliffordist and foundationalist, and conducts an extensive discussion about Roderick Chisholm's foundationalism. Thus, Cliffordism as he understands it seems to allow other than justified beliefs as reasons or evidence, such as non-doxastic experiences or seemings.

However, if we accept this more liberal interpretation of the Cliffordian principle, it becomes unclear why we should reject foundationalism, according to which the regress ends in basic beliefs that are justified even though they do not derive their justification from other justified beliefs. Nevertheless, Fogelin (1994: 123–162) argues that the best existing theories of this sort, such as Chisholm's foundationalism and BonJour's holistic coherentism, fail because they do not even come close to satisfying the success conditions for a theory of justification.

Fogelin (117–119, 138–139) provides three success conditions for such a theory: (1) it should help to determine which particular beliefs are justified; (2) it should explain why these particular beliefs are justified; and finally (3) it should be defended by arguments that do not beg the question against skepticism, in other words: the arguments should not depend on the undefended assumption that we do have some justified beliefs.

The first two conditions seem quite reasonable, but although Fogelin sees much to be hoped for in Chisholm's and BonJour's theories regarding them, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that many theories can satisfy them. It is the third condition that is hard to satisfy. Indeed, it seems to be impossible.[4] However, it is strange that Fogelin should hang on to it. He claims elsewhere that we need to assume that we do have justified beliefs in order to have Agrippa's problem at all, but here he states that we are not allowed to make this assumption if we want to solve the problem. Indeed, it was this assumption that points to Fogelin's understanding of the problem as a paradox, and it seems that all we need to do in order to solve a paradox is to determine which of the propositions comprising it is false and explain why. This is exactly what we can do if we have a theory that satisfies Fogelin's first two conditions for success.

Perhaps the problem is that we have competing possible solutions and should not just assume that we have the right one, thereby begging the question against the alternatives. One of those possible solutions is the skeptical one supporting the conclusion that we have no justified beliefs. Thus, we should not just assume that we have justified beliefs and beg the question against the skeptical option. This is exactly what epistemologists do, Fogelin (1994: 119) claims, when they first assume that we have justified beliefs and then argue by means of disjunctive elimination that only their own theory can explain this. For example, foundationalists argue that because infinitely regressive reasoning, circular reasoning, and reasoning starting from arbitrary premises cannot make beliefs justified, there must be basic beliefs that are justified independently of reasoning. This

argument merely assumes that we have justified beliefs and thus begs the question against the skeptical resolution of the paradox.

However, if we understand Agrippa's problem in this way, we should ask where the motivation for the third condition of success comes from. Why are we not allowed to beg the question?[5] This requirement does not come from the Cliffordian principle or the considered theories of justification, which are non-dialectical. They allow justified beliefs that we cannot defend without begging the question. It therefore seems that Fogelin's dialectical requirement comes from the modes of Agrippa. If this is the case, they may not constitute an epistemically neutral skeptical strategy that can be directed against any theory of justification, as Fogelin (1997: 397) assumes. They presuppose in themselves some requirements for justification.

5. The Dialectical Regress

Although the contemporary discussion of Agrippa's problem typically focuses on three modes, the original problem, as Sextus Empiricus describes it in the Outlines of Scepticism (PH I 164–177), comprises five modes. It is the remaining two modes that bring on the dialectical requirements. Fogelin refers to them as the challenging modes:

> Two of Agrippa's modes, discrepancy and relativity, trigger a demand for justification by revealing that there are competing claims concerning the nature of the world we perceive. Given this competition, it would be epistemically irresponsible for the Cliffordian to choose without argument one of these competing claims over others. Thus the modes of discrepancy and relativity force anyone who makes claims beyond the modest expression of opinion to give reasons in support of these claims. (Fogelin 1994: 116)

He refers to the rest of them as the dialectical modes:

> The task of the remaining modes—those based on regress ad infinitum, circularity, and (arbitrary) hypothesis—is to show that it is impossible to complete this reason-giving process in a satisfactory way. If the Pyrrhonists are right, no argument, once started, can avoid falling into one of the traps of circularity, infinite regress, or arbitrary assumption. (1994: 116)

Fogelin thus understands the modes as showing that it is impossible to adequately justify or defend our beliefs once they are properly challenged. He thus appears to be suggesting that Agrippa's

problem does not—as we assumed—concern the structure of justification: it rather concerns the process of justification, our ability to defend our beliefs by giving reasons for them (see also Williams 2001: 61–63). This way of understanding the modes makes it easier to understand why Fogelin believes that existing theories of justification fail: because there is disagreement about the conditions of justification, one should not accept any theory of justification without defending it against competing theories, but no such theory can be defended without begging the question. However, the way Fogelin describes the modes makes them more widely applicable. They do not merely challenge epistemologists to defend their theories of justification: "the modes of discrepancy and relativity force anyone who makes claims beyond the modest expression of opinion to give reasons in support of these claims" (Fogelin 1994: 116). Hence, the Agrippan modes apply to any knowledge claim whatever the subject matter.

It is somewhat surprising that Fogelin very quickly starts considering whether certain existing theories of justification meet the conditions of success and ignores the question of whether these theories can explain how to stop the process of reason-giving in the first place. Perhaps this is because the phrases Fogelin (2004: 162) uses—"validating knowledge claims" and "presenting reasons establishing their legitimacy"—are ambiguous between showing that a claim or belief is true (justifying it) and showing that it is justified (justifying the claim that it is justified). In the book he concentrates on the latter rendering, although it is the former that is more fundamental—the latter is just a special case of it.

In any case, Fogelin is committed to the failure of existing theories of justification to address the first-order problem: if some such theory, such as foundationalism, can solve the first-order problem, there seems to be no reason to doubt its ability to solve the second-order problem as well. For example, if a foundationalist can stop the first-order regress by appealing to basic beliefs, why could he not do the same with the second-order regress? He could simply deny the arbitrariness of the second-order belief that a particular belief is justified. It is not arbitrary because it is itself a basic belief, which can then be used as evidence for the theory of justification.[6] Therefore, in order to block this move Fogelin needs to show that foundationalism fails to explain how to stop the reason-giving regress.

6. Can Foundationalism Stop the Dialectical Regress?

We can thus assume that Agrippa's problem concerns the reason-giving or dialectical regress. Because Fogelin's neo-Pyrrhonism is based on the failure of existing theories of justification to solve it, we are owed an explanation as to why they fail and, indeed, why the failure leads to dogmatic skepticism. Unfortunately, Fogelin does not discuss this explicitly. We have to turn to

another philosopher, Peter Klein (2005: 131–135), who understands Agrippa's problem in a similar way and argues in greater detail that foundationalism cannot solve the problem. Because, as Klein points out, holistic coherentism is just a special case of foundationalism, foundationalism covers very well the theories Fogelin discusses in his book.

In explaining why foundationalism cannot solve Agrippa's problem, Klein (2005: 133) imagines a dialogue between Fred, the Foundationalist, and Doris, the Doubter. Fred asserts proposition p. Doris asks Fred for his reasons for believing that p, perhaps saying, "Why do you believe that p?" or "How do you know that p?" Fred then gives his reason, r_1, for p. Doris asks why r_1 is true, and Fred gives another reason, r_2. This goes on until Fred arrives at reason b, which he takes to be a basic proposition. Doris naturally asks Fred for his reasons for b, but Fred, being a self-conscious foundationalist, tells Doris that b is a basic proposition that does not need reasons in order to be justified. Thus Doris's request for reasons is inappropriate.

In Klein's view, Doris can concede for the sake of argument that foundationalism is true and that b is basic in virtue of possessing some property F, such that any proposition having F is non-inferentially justified. Even so, she can say to Fred: "Do you think that propositions having F are likely to be true?" Once Fred considers the proposition that such propositions are likely to be true, he faces three options: to (1) affirm it, (2) deny it, or (3) withhold it. If he affirms it, Doris will ask him for his reasons, and the regress does not stop. If he either denies or withholds it, he should concede that that p is not, after all, justified for him, presumably because in both cases he would have a defeater for his justification for believing that p.[7] Klein concludes that foundationalism does not solve Agrippa's problem. It cannot explain how the reason-giving regress can be stopped. Indeed, though Klein does not put it in this way, a foundationalist should concede that if foundationalism is true, there are no justified beliefs. This is exactly the result Fogelin wants.

However, there is a response that a foundationalist can give: to affirm that propositions having F are likely to be true, and even to give reasons for this generalization, but to insist that the justification of b does not depend on this generalization, which just explains why b is basic. A foundationalist can and should have an explanation for what makes basic propositions basic. Such an explanation does not mean that the propositions are not basic, however. On the contrary, it is assumed to explain why subjects without the epistemological sophistication to defend their beliefs can have justified beliefs (Bergmann 2004: 164–165).

Doris may point out that this response changes the subject, which is justification rather than explanation. The aim of the modes—within the present interpretation—is to show that no proposition can be justified by giving reasons for them. The challenging modes are supposed to raise doubts about the truth of a proposition, and pointing out that the proposition is basic does not

answer the challenge because even the truth of basic propositions can be challenged (cf. Klein 2004: 169–170). Foundationalism thus appears unable to explain how the reason-giving regress can be stopped. Yet it does not follow that there are no justified beliefs if foundationalism is true. Justification must also depend on the ability to respond to challenges by giving reasons. This is what the modes must assume if they are to support skepticism. However, it is what contemporary foundationalists can and typically do deny, insisting that justification does not require an ability to give reasons. Before evaluating this response, let us see what Agrippa's problem looks like once this implicit assumption about the nature of justification is made explicit.

7. The Dialectical Problem

As shown above, two of Agrippa's modes challenge us to give reasons for our beliefs, and the rest of them aim to show that the reason-giving process cannot succeed. If they are to constitute a skeptical argument for concluding that there are no justified beliefs, some epistemic principle connecting justification to reason-giving must be presupposed. Let us suppose that the principle is this:

(D1) If S is justified in believing that p, S can defend p against appropriate challenges.

Assuming this principle, Agrippa's modes become relevant to justification. The challenging modes show that there are appropriate challenges to the truth of p, and the dialectical modes show that the challenges cannot be answered. Hence the second premise:

(D2) S cannot defend p against appropriate challenges.

The conclusion follows from these premises via modus tollens:

(D3) S is not justified in believing that p.

In fact, the challenging modes and the dialectical modes work in tandem. When S tries to defend p by giving reasons for p, the challenging modes show that these reasons can be challenged, and when S gives further reasons for these reasons, the challenging modes are applied to these reasons, and so on. The dialectical modes show that this reason-giving regress can end only in three bad ways, none of which can provide an adequate response to the challenges. D2 is thus true, and D3 follows from D1 and D2.

Now, it is clear why the appeal to basic beliefs appears to fail. Because the truth of even these beliefs can be challenged, they are not able to stop the regress. However, this argument may not serve the neo-Pyrrhonist's dialectical purposes as Fogelin understands them: the neo-Pyrrhonist is supposed to use premises that her dogmatic opponent, the foundationalist, accepts and then to show that there are no justified beliefs. The problem is that the foundationalist need not accept premises D1 and D2. He can deny either one or the other.

8. Are We All Neo-Pyrrhonists Now?

Fogelin seems to be aware of this problem. In his Fogelin (2004: 164), he notes that many contemporary epistemologists—he calls them New Epistemologists—"have foresworn this large-scale attempt at validation through reason-giving." They have either severed the connection between knowledge and reason-giving altogether, or dispersed reason-giving into a plurality of contexts.

According to externalists/reliabilists, beliefs are made justified by their reliable connection to reality. Thus, we can know without being able to defend our beliefs by giving reasons for their truth or for their being based on reliable sources. What matters is that they are, in fact, based on reliable sources. Hence, the modes of Agrippa are no threat to our knowledge.

Contextualists, inspired by Wittgenstein's last manuscript On Certainty, concede that knowledge and justification depend on the ability to respond to challenges, but they insist that the question of which challenges are appropriate and need to be responded to is context-dependent. In philosophical or skeptical contexts in which ineliminable skeptical error-possibilities are under discussion, I know nothing about the external world because I cannot show that I am not a brain in a vat. However, in ordinary contexts, in which the challenge that I may be a brain in a vat is not appropriate, I do have knowledge about the external world because I can defend myself against the challenges that are appropriate in these contexts.

Both options deny one of the premises of the reconstructed Agrippan argument. Externalist/reliabilists deny D1. They deny that justification is a matter of being able to respond to challenges. This is a very popular position nowadays, accepted not only by externalists but also by many internalists who typically think that non-doxastic experiences can make beliefs justified. There are far fewer Wittgensteinian contextualists who accept D1 but deny D2. However, both options avoid the skeptical conclusion arising from Agrippa's modes.

What should a neo-Pyrrhonist say to such New Epistemologists? According to Fogelin (2004: 166–170), she should point out that their doctrines will leave you dissatisfied if you are looking for good reasons for believing that you are not a brain in a vat. Saying that you may still

know, because your beliefs are reliably connected to the external world, does not give you what you are looking for: good reasons for believing that your beliefs are so connected, and that you are not a brain in a vat. Thus the alleged consolation that the externalist/reliabilist can give simply changes the subject.

The contextualist's consolation is also beside the point. When you are looking for reasons to deny the skeptical hypothesis, you are actually in a philosophical context in which, the contextualist concedes, you know nothing about the external world. It does not console you to be told that knowledge attributions made in ordinary contexts may still be true. You are now in a philosophical context in which you know nothing.

Fogelin admits that he has interpreted the New Epistemologists as if they are continuing the traditional epistemological project of trying to show that we have knowledge without falling into the modes of circularity, infinite regress, and arbitrary hypothesis. However, there is no reason to assume that this is what they try to do. They do, or at least should, realize that this is a project that cannot succeed for simple logical reasons, as Ernest Sosa (2009: 159) points out:

> It is impossible to attain a legitimating account of absolutely all one's own knowledge; such an account admits only justifications provided by inference or argument and, since it rules out circular or endlessly regressive inferences, such an account must stop with premises that it supposes or "presupposes" that one is justified in accepting, without explaining how one is justified in accepting them in turn.

It should be clear by now that it is impossible to show that we have knowledge (or justified beliefs) without circularity, infinite regress, or assuming some knowledge (or justified beliefs). No epistemologist should seriously pursue the end of legitimating all our knowledge at once.

As his final point, Fogelin (2004: 170–171) concedes that New Epistemologists who have given up the legitimating project are no longer the targets of a Pyrrhonian attack, but only because they have themselves become neo-Pyrrhonists. This is a very disappointing result. It means that virtually all epistemologists nowadays are neo-Pyrrhonists. Why should we even bother to argue for the position? What is worse, it cannot be right. Neo-Pyrrhonists are skeptics about philosophy, but most epistemologists who reject the legitimating project are not such skeptics. Once the legitimating project and either premise of the Agrippan argument are rejected, we lack a philosophical argument for skepticism about philosophy or other matters.

9. How to Be a Neo-Pyrrhonist

Fogelin argues that neo-Pyrrhonism results naturally from reflection on our ordinary epistemic procedures. Because these procedures do not eliminate all possibilities of error, it is always possible to raise the level of scrutiny by paying attention to new error-possibilities. When we allow the level of scrutiny to rise without restriction, we will conclude that nothing is known. Fogelin understands theories of justification as attempting to repair this fragility in our ordinary procedures. Unfortunately, these theories fail because they cannot solve Agrippa's problem. Therefore, we have no choice but to settle for the fragility of ordinary knowledge attributions and become neo-Pyrrhonists.

I have argued that Fogelin fails to show that contemporary theories of justification cannot solve Agrippa's problem. The quandary is that, as a neo-Pyrrhonist, Fogelin may use only premises that advocates of those theories accept in order to show that they have skeptical consequences. I have given two versions of the argument on which Agrippa's problem seems to be based: the structural and the dialectical. In neither version are most contemporary epistemologists committed to the truth of the premises of the argument. Indeed, it follows from their theories that one or another of them is false. Hence, neo-Pyrrhonism appears to lose its motivation.

However, there is a more direct way of defending neo-Pyrrhonism. The neo-Pyrrhonist may argue that the premises of Agrippan argument are intuitively plausible, and that neo-Pyrrhonism provides the best resolution of the resulting paradox. Only neo-Pyrrhonism both explains the intuitive plausibility of the premises and avoids dogmatic skepticism.

It seems that the paradox does arise from the ordinary practice of knowledge attribution. It is plausible to assume that the purpose of this practice is to share information (Craig 1990). When I attribute knowledge to someone else, I pick her out as an informant. If she says that p, I believe that p. However, I cannot believe her and attribute knowledge to her unless I believe what she says is true. If I believe it is true, there may be no need to ask for reasons, but if I am not convinced of the truth of what she says, it is quite appropriate to ask her: "How do you know?" or "What reasons do you have for believing so?" If she can answer my question by giving reasons that I take to be true and to support her belief, I take her to be justified in her belief and to know what she is saying. If she cannot do this, I will not take her as an informant and will deny her knowledge. Thus, it seems that the practice of knowledge attribution supports the view that knowledge and justification depend on an ability to give reasons when properly challenged. Premise D1 appears to be true.

When I attribute knowledge to myself I typically volunteer myself as an informant for other people. Because I want to convince them—to share my information with them—I am prepared to give reasons when properly challenged. If I cannot do this, I understand that I am not a good informant and am ready to take back my knowledge self-attribution—indeed, I am ready to deny

my knowledge. As my audience grows larger and larger, it becomes less and less likely that I can convince all of its members. Indeed, it is the point of the mode of discrepancy or disagreement to bring it to mind that there are always some people that I cannot convince with my reasons and must therefore give up my knowledge claim. Hence premise D2 also appears to be true.

However, in ordinary contexts we are ready to attribute knowledge even though we are aware that there are people whom the subject cannot convince. Thus, in one context we are inclined to attribute knowledge that we deny in another context. The semantic theory that aims to explain these apparently inconsistent attributions and denials is contextualism. According to the version of it that is relevant here, the content and truth of knowledge attribution depend on the attributor's intentions and interests—especially on the intended audience. If this is true, we can easily explain our intuitions about the Agrippan argument. If the intended audience is a skeptic, we cannot defend our beliefs against all the challenges she raises. Consequently, the premises and the conclusion of the argument are indeed true in a context in which we are trying to convince a persistent skeptic. However, knowledge attributions are often true in ordinary contexts, because either the intended audience has no challenges[8] or the subject can answer them.

This contextualist resolution of Agrippa's paradox closely resembles Fogelin's neo-Pyrrhonism: such a neo-Pyrrhonist is a skeptic about philosophy. There are so many persistent disagreements in philosophy that knowledge attribution will almost always be false in philosophical contexts. Furthermore, one of the main criticisms of contextualism has been that it has no epistemological consequences. It does not follow from the fact that people often speak the truth when they use sentences of the form "S knows that p" in ordinary contexts that anybody knows anything (Sosa 2000). This is no problem for the neo-Pyrrhonists. It is rather the central feature of their position that they go on making knowledge attributions about everyday matters while suspending judgment about the traditional epistemological question concerning the scope of knowledge.

An alternative way of explaining the plausibility of the Agrippan argument is to assume that it is based on confusion between knowledge and assertion (Rescorla 2009; Gerken 2012; cf. Turri 2012). One might concede that a warranted assertion requires defense against challenges, but it can be denied that knowledge requires this: you may very well know something that you cannot defend and thus properly assert. Agrippa's problem concerns only what you may assert and is therefore epistemically harmless. However, this view still provides a version of neo-Pyrrhonism: its target is assertion rather than knowledge. Indeed, Duncan Pritchard (2005: 213–220) argues that this is the right way of understanding ancient Pyrrhonism. A Pyrrhonist may very well have beliefs and thus

knowledge, but she makes no dogmatic assertions. Of course, contextualized neo-Pyrrhonism may even allow assertions in contexts where there are no appropriate challenges.

There are thus two initially quite plausible versions of neo-Pyrrhonism that both seem to accord with practices of knowledge attribution. The choice between them depends on whether we should prefer semantic or pragmatic resolutions of Agrippa's problem and other skeptical paradoxes, which is a big question in contemporary epistemology and philosophy of language.[9]

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[1] Fogelin seems to accept some sort of relevant alternative account here. Cf. Lewis (1996: 551): "S knows that P iff S's evidence eliminated every possibility in which not-P – Psst! – except for those possibilities that we are properly ignoring."

[2] As Juan Comesaña (2005) points out, these judgments are still normative, being attributions of justification.

[3] According to holistic coherentism, justification does not transfer from one belief to another. It emerges from the whole system of beliefs when there are enough crisscrossing inferential relations among them. It has been noted that this view makes every justified belief a basic belief. So holistic coherentism is a form of foundationalism, which Sosa (1991b: 180) calls formal foundationalism.

[4] See Chisholm (1982: 61–75) on the problem of the criterion. Chisholm insists, plausibly, that we cannot solve the problem of the criterion without begging the question against skepticism.

[5] Chisholm (1982: 75) acknowledges that "we can deal with the problem only by begging the question" and insists that this is exactly what we should do. See also Sosa (2009: 176).

[6] Chisholm (1982: 68–69) calls this strategy particularism. It seems that a particularist should think that there are basic epistemic beliefs about particular cases of justified beliefs. See, for example, Sosa (1991a: 158) and Lemos (2007: 160).

[7] At least foundationalists such as Bergmann (2005: 426) and Feldman (2006: 232–233) accept that not only the denial of reliability but also the conscious suspension of judgment about it would defeat one's justification.

[8] There are, of course, other conditions that must be satisfied if knowledge attributions are to be true, such as truth, reliability, and perhaps safety.

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