

## Meta-Skepticism

Olle Risberg

Uppsala University

Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

(Please cite published version where possible)

**Abstract:** The epistemological debate about radical skepticism has focused on whether our beliefs in apparently obvious claims, such as the claim that we have hands, amount to knowledge. Arguably, however, our concept of knowledge is only one of many knowledge-like concepts that there are. If this is correct, it follows that even if our beliefs satisfy our concept of knowledge, there are many other relevantly similar concepts that they fail to satisfy. And this might give us pause. After all, we might wonder: What is so great about the concept of knowledge that we happen to have? Might it be more important, epistemically speaking, to investigate whether our beliefs satisfy some other relevantly similar concept instead? And how should questions such as these even be understood? This paper discusses the epistemological significance of these issues. In particular, a novel skeptical stance called ‘meta-skepticism’ is introduced, which is a kind of skepticism about the idea that some knowledge-like concepts are epistemically more important than others. It suggested that it is unclear whether this form of skepticism can be avoided.

### 1. Introduction

Radical skeptical challenges in epistemology have traditionally sought to show that our beliefs in some domain are unjustified, irrational, or fail to amount to knowledge. The aim of this paper is to formulate and discuss the significance of a different form of skepticism, which I will call *meta-skepticism*. While traditional skeptical challenges are concerned with the possibility of knowledge, justified belief, and the like, the meta-skeptical challenge instead

focuses on the *significance* of these notions. What this means will become apparent as the paper proceeds.

The challenge that I will formulate is motivated by a kind of *pluralism* about epistemic concepts. This is the view that in addition to the epistemic concepts that we actually have—e.g., KNOWLEDGE, JUSTIFICATION, and EVIDENCE—there are also many other, equally real knowledge-, justification- and evidence-like concepts.<sup>1</sup> A consequence of this view is that even if our beliefs satisfy *our* epistemic concepts—i.e., even if they amount to knowledge, or are justified, etc.—there are many other relevantly similar concepts that they fail to satisfy. This raises the question: What is so great about the epistemic concepts that we happen to have? Might it be more important to investigate whether our beliefs satisfy some other relevantly similar concepts instead? And how should questions such as these even be understood?

Pluralist views and their consequences have recently been much discussed in metaethics (e.g., Eklund, 2017; Clarke-Doane, 2020a), metaphysics (e.g., Hirsch, 2002; Sider, 2011; Dasgupta, 2018) and many other areas, but they have received less attention in epistemology.<sup>2</sup> As I hope to show, however, epistemological pluralism can be used to challenge foundational assumptions that are often made in the debate. One of them is that the crucial question raised by skeptical challenges is whether we know (or justifiably believe, etc.) certain claims, such as the claim that we have hands. Contrary to this, I will consider forms of skepticism that remain untouched even if it is *granted* that we have such knowledge. I will argue that for this reason, it is unclear how the most thoroughgoing form of anti-skepticism should even be formulated. While this means that it is also unclear how an equally thoroughgoing form of skepticism should be formulated, I will further suggest that this sort of stalemate is itself best seen as a skeptical result. To answer the meta-skeptical challenge, then, this is the result that needs to be avoided.

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<sup>1</sup> I will sometimes use small caps to denote concepts, when doing so increases clarity.

<sup>2</sup> The only extended discussion of epistemological pluralism (in the sense that I am using the term) that I am aware of is in Clarke-Doane (2020b). However, Clarke-Doane does not consider the consequences that pluralism has for skepticism. I return to Clarke-Doane's views in section 5.4.

The plan of the paper is as follows. I introduce the general idea of pluralism about a concept in section 2, and pluralism about epistemic concepts specifically in section 3. I then begin considering the implications of epistemic pluralism for the debate about radical skepticism in section 4, before formulating the meta-skeptical challenge in section 5 and critically discussing possible responses to it. Section 6 concludes.

## 2. Pluralism

As already mentioned, the suggestion that certain forms of pluralism may have significant consequences is familiar from several areas of philosophy. In metaphysics, this has been claimed about questions concerning, e.g., what exists (Hirsch, 2002), what kinds of objects there are (Carnap, 1950), what is possible (Clarke-Doane & McCarthy, forthcoming), and whether certain concepts or properties ‘carve nature at its joints’ (Dasgupta, 2018). In metaethics, pluralist views have been used to raise questions about the status of central normative concepts such as OUGHT (Eklund, 2017; Clarke-Doane, 2020a). In the philosophy of language and logic, pluralist views about notions such as truth, validity, and reference have seen lots of discussion (e.g., Stich, 1990; Beall & Restall, 2006; Lynch, 2009).<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, however, there is only one explicit extended discussion of the relevant form of pluralism in epistemology (Clarke-Doane, 2020b; I return to Clarke-Doane’s view below), and none that considers the connections between pluralism and skepticism.

While the term ‘pluralism’ has been used in different ways, the idea that I have in mind is that concepts are in some sense *abundant*, *plentiful* or *cheap*. It is in many cases plausible that in addition to the concepts that we in fact use, there are many similar concepts that we could have used instead. To begin with an easy illustration, consider the ordinary concept HOUSE. Since tents and houseboats, for instance, are not houses, our concept HOUSE does not include tents and houseboats in its extension. Nonetheless, it is easy to imagine that we could have ended up using a HOUSE-like concept that differs in this regard. In other words, instead of

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<sup>3</sup> In a recent paper on logical pluralism, Eklund (2020b: sect. 8) also mentions that parallel questions can also be raised in epistemology.

HOUSE, we could have used a concept HOUSE\* such that tents, houses, and houseboats all count as houses\*.

In accordance with this, the view that one might call *house pluralism* states that there are many different HOUSE-like concepts, where some include tents and houseboats in their extension while others do not.<sup>4</sup> The HOUSE-like concepts are all equally real and satisfiable—the salient difference is just that we use some of them but not others. (I focus on pluralist views about *concepts*, but this is simply for convenience—one could just as well formulate a pluralist view about the predicate ‘is a house’, according to which there are many different possible ‘is a house’-like predicates, or one about the property of being a house, according to which there are many distinct properties that resemble it.<sup>5</sup>)

While pluralism about the concept HOUSE, I take it, is very plausible, it is not very exciting. But pluralist views about more philosophically interesting concepts raise important questions. For example, consider the thesis known as ‘quantifier variance’ (Hirsch, 2002). A central element of this thesis is that there are in some sense *many different existential quantifiers*—or, as it is sometimes put, many different ‘existence concepts’ or ‘concepts of existence’. This pluralist thesis about existence has been taken to motivate a deflationary stance towards various ontological controversies, including those that concern the existence of properties, numbers, ordinary material objects (such as tables and chairs), non-ordinary material objects (such as the putative one composed by Barack Obama and the Eiffel Tower), and so on. Briefly, the idea is that if there is some alternative existence concept EXISTENCE\* such that (e.g.) ordinary objects exist but do not exist\*, then there is no serious philosophical question concerning whether ordinary objects *really* exist—they exist but do not exist\* and

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<sup>4</sup> For another example, see Clarke-Doane (2020, sect. 1.6), who considers a similar kind of pluralist view about lines.

<sup>5</sup> To simplify further, I will assume that concepts can exist without being used by any particular thinker. (I prefer to think of concepts as abstract objects, but other views are also possible.) For present purposes there is no need to assume that concepts are highly fine-grained, so I will only assume that if concepts *A* and *B* have different extensions across metaphysically possible worlds—i.e., if it is metaphysically possible that something satisfies *A* while not satisfying *B*—then *A* and *B* are distinct. To say that something satisfies a concept is simply to say that it is in the concept’s extension.

that is that. The only question that remains is the purely linguistic, contingent one of whether the ordinary English term ‘existence’ expresses EXISTENCE or EXISTENCE\*. And although that question may have a determinate answer, the thought goes, it will not tell us much about the ‘ultimate furniture of the universe’, or about any other issue worthy of serious philosophical attention.

Although pluralist views can in this way *motivate* a deflationary stance towards some subject matter, such a stance is not a *direct consequence* of pluralism as I think of it. To see this, compare the view of existence just described with the one endorsed by Sider (2011). While Sider agrees that there are (in some sense) many different existential quantifiers, he also accepts the further crucial claim that not all those quantifiers carve nature at its joints. For this reason, he thinks, there is a very serious philosophical question concerning which quantifier that does carve nature at its joints. Accordingly, as I use the term, a pluralist view of a concept *C* is itself neutral on whether some *C*-like concepts are in some sense joint-carving, or otherwise metaphysically privileged.

The kind of deflationary stance considered above has sometimes been motivated in a different way, by appeal to the idea that certain facts are somehow ‘up to us’ (roughly in the sense of depending on our minds, languages, or conventions), and in that sense fail to be objective. It is thus worth noting that pluralism as I have formulated it does not have any direct consequences along those lines either. To illustrate, in the example of houses, it need not in any sense be mind- or language-dependent that a certain object, *H*, is a house. What is language-dependent is only what proposition a sentence like ‘*H* is a house’ expresses—and that much is true of any sentence whatsoever.

Quantifier variance and other similar theses are also associated with the idea that participants in various philosophical debates (such as those about what exists) use certain central terms (e.g., ‘exists’) with different meanings, and thus ‘talk past each other’, or ‘merely verbally disagree’. This claim may well entail a kind of pluralism about the relevant area—at least given that the different meanings of the term in question are relevantly similar to each other—but the converse relation does not hold. As Eklund (2020a: 188) notes, one can coherently hold that there are different, relevantly similar things that *could* be meant by an

expression such as ‘exists’, even though as it happens, everyone who *in fact* uses the term uses it with the same meaning.

While some of the examples I have considered above may seem artificial, they illustrate a substantive more general point: Various kinds of historical contingencies, such as sociological, psychological, and biological ones, are often at least partially responsible for what concepts we employ, and there is no guarantee that the distinctions we can draw using those concepts are the most important ones for whatever practical or theoretical purposes we may have (cf. McPherson & Plunkett, 2021: sect. 2). This is one of the thoughts that have motivated the recent debates in ‘conceptual engineering’ and nearby areas (e.g., Haslanger, 1999, 2000; Burgess & Plunkett, 2013; Cappelen, 2018), which seek to assess the merits of our concepts and consider whether they could be improved, or replaced with better ones.

### 3. Epistemic Pluralism

In analogy to the examples discussed above, *pluralism about the concept of knowledge* is the view that in addition to our ordinary concept of knowledge, there are many other, equally real knowledge-like concepts.<sup>6</sup> One way to think about these different concepts is to take them to correspond to different epistemological theories that have been presented in the literature.<sup>7</sup> (It is not the only way, but it is easy to grasp.) Here are some simplified examples:<sup>8</sup>

**The JTB Theory:** *S* knows that *p* if and only if *S* has a justified true belief that *p*.

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<sup>6</sup> It is tempting to formulate pluralism about knowledge as the view that there are different ‘knowledge concepts’, or different ‘concepts of knowledge’, similarly to how the thesis of quantifier variance is often formulated as the idea that there are different ‘existence concepts’ or different ‘concepts of existence’ (cf. sect. 2). I will resist this temptation and stick with the more cumbersome formulation in terms of ‘knowledge-like concepts’, however, for the simple reason that any concept that is non-coextensive with KNOWLEDGE is strictly speaking a concept of some other property.

<sup>7</sup> This mirrors Eklund’s (2020: 2068) presentation of a version of truth pluralism, according to which there are distinct truth-like concepts that correspond to the well-known theories of truth (i.e., the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, and so on).

<sup>8</sup> For further examples, see Alston (2005: 12–15), who lists 16 (!) ‘conceptions’ of justified (or rational) belief. On a pluralist view of justification, there are 16 different justification-like concepts corresponding to these 16 conceptions.

**The Causal Theory:** *S* knows that *p* if and only if *S* has a belief that *p* that was caused by the fact that *p*.

**The Safety Theory:** *S* knows that *p* if and only if *S* has a true belief that *p* in all sufficiently nearby possible worlds (in which she uses the same method of belief-formation as the one she actually uses).<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not these theories are true of knowledge, epistemic pluralism entails that there are *some* knowledge-like concepts—we could call them KNOWLEDGE<sub>JTB</sub>, KNOWLEDGE<sub>C</sub>, and KNOWLEDGE<sub>S</sub>—that a belief that *p* satisfies when it is justified and true, when it is caused by the fact that *p*, and when the subject has a true belief that *p* in all sufficiently nearby possible worlds, respectively. Whether those concepts can correctly be said to be *the concept of knowledge* depends, of course, on what concept the word ‘knowledge’ expresses in the language that we are currently using. However, those concepts are plausibly at least *knowledge-like* and, on the pluralist view, just as real and satisfiable as the ordinary concept of knowledge is.

One immediate question at this point is: What, more exactly, does it take for a concept to be knowledge-like? I will not attempt to provide general necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge-likeness here, since that might require taking a stand on controversial questions about how the actual concept of knowledge should be analyzed. (For instance, if our concept of knowledge is ‘internalist’ in some strong sense, that might support thinking that only internalist concepts count as knowledge-like.) A further complication is that a concept might resemble our concept of knowledge in one way but not in another.

However, even disregarding general questions about what it takes for a concept to be knowledge-like, the idea that there are many knowledge-like concepts is vindicated by many popular epistemological views. For example, if the safety theory formulated above is true, so that *S*’s knowing that *p* requires that *S* has a true belief that *p* in all relevant nearby worlds, then there is a similar but more demanding concept whose satisfaction requires that *S* also has

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Olsson (2015), who argues that contrary to what Gettier cases are widely taken to show, an explication of the ordinary concept of knowledge can be adequate even if it (like the JTB theory) entails that coincidentally true beliefs can amount to knowledge.

a true belief that  $p$  in some further-away worlds, and a similar but less demanding concept whose satisfaction requires only that  $S$  has a true belief that  $p$  in some very nearby worlds. Similarly, there are different ways to understand the notion of a method of belief-formation that safety theories involve (for a helpful overview, see Rabinowitz, n.d.), and there may be different knowledge-like concepts corresponding to these different understandings of a method. Similar points can be made in relation to other views of knowledge.

While the points just made concern pluralism about the concept of knowledge specifically, similar pluralist views can be formulated about our other epistemic concepts, such as JUSTIFICATION, EVIDENCE, RATIONALITY, and so on. Accordingly, we can understand *epistemic pluralism* as the view that for *all* our epistemic concepts, there are many other relevantly similar but distinct concepts. (Epistemic pluralism thus entails pluralism about knowledge, pluralism about justification, and so on, but not vice versa.) To keep things simple, I will mostly focus on the concept of knowledge, but I trust that it will be clear how the points I make about knowledge generalize to other epistemic concepts.

There are many other epistemological theses that have been called ‘pluralist’ theses but which differ from pluralism as I understand it here. One such thesis states that there is nothing very unified or principled to say about when a belief counts as knowledge (or as justified, etc.), because what it takes for a belief to count as knowledge varies greatly between different contexts or situations (cf. M. Williams, 1988). Another thesis states that different people have different views about when a belief counts as knowledge or as justified, and none of these views can be justified without begging the question against its competitors.<sup>10</sup> These views neither entail nor follow from epistemic pluralism as I understand it here; in fact, they concern entirely different things. For one, it is compatible with epistemic pluralism (in the sense that interests me) that there are perfectly unified things to say about when a belief counts

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<sup>10</sup> This thesis is roughly a combination of what Kusch (2017) calls ‘pluralism’ and ‘no-metajustification’. Kuhn, whose views I will return to below, sometimes takes his incommensurability thesis to have implications along these lines: As he puts it, “[t]here is no neutral algorithm for theory-choice, no systematic decision procedure which, properly applied, must lead each individual in the group to the same decision” (Kuhn, 1970: 200). For other ways in which the term ‘epistemic pluralism’ may be used, see Coliva and Pedersen (2017) and the articles therein.

as knowledge (e.g., when it is justified, true, and satisfies some anti-Gettier condition). It is also compatible with epistemic pluralism that one view of justification or knowledge can be justified over all others in a non-question-begging way. What epistemic pluralism entails is just that even if our concepts of knowledge and justification have these features, there are other relevantly similar concepts that do not.

While epistemic pluralism has received little direct attention, important work has been done on related issues. For example, Eklund (2017) and Clarke-Doane (2020a) both discuss questions about what follows from pluralist theses about normative concepts, such as OUGHT and GOOD. Both their discussions focus mostly on practical normativity, and in particular, on questions about what actions we ought to perform. However, if one thinks that epistemic concepts are normative in the same sense that practical normative concepts are, the pluralist theses they discuss can be taken to imply pluralism about epistemic concepts as well.<sup>11</sup>

Other debates in epistemology arguably presuppose some form of pluralism. For example, some of the aforementioned debates in conceptual engineering have focused on epistemic concepts specifically, with Haslanger (1999) being an influential early example. The possibility of ‘engineering’ our concept of knowledge, or replacing it with a different, relevantly similar one, presumably requires that there are other relevantly similar concepts that it can be engineered into or replaced with. Much the same can be said about Alston’s (2005) suggestion that disputes about epistemic justification are ‘merely verbal’, in the sense

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<sup>11</sup> I am myself uncertain about whether there is a deep, illuminating sense in which both epistemic concepts (such as KNOWLEDGE and EVIDENCE) and practical concepts (such as OUGHT TO PERFORM) can be said to be normative. After all, as Plunkett (2020: 529) notes, “there might be a range of important, only partly overlapping ‘normative vs. non-normative’ distinctions we use [...] Maybe some of those matter more in one context (e.g. when engaging in certain projects in political philosophy) and others matter more in others (e.g. when engaging in certain projects in epistemology). For example, perhaps something tied to speaker-endorsement is more important in certain contexts, whereas something tied to guiding first-personal deliberation is more important in others – and both things are tracked using the language of what is ‘normative’ vs. not in their respective contexts.” I intend my arguments in this paper to be neutral on these issues. For further discussion of practical normativity, see Risberg (forthcoming).

that the parties in question mean different things by ‘is justified’ and its cognates.<sup>12</sup> Given that the different concepts expressed by ‘is justified’ are all justification-like, this entails a form of pluralism about justification. But the converse does not hold, since, as noted above (sect. 2), pluralism about justification is neutral on whether disputes about justification are merely verbal. All pluralism requires is that *there are* many justification-like concepts, whether or not these concepts are also ever expressed by ‘is justified’ in everyday or philosophical discussions.<sup>13</sup>

It is also possible to take work in the history of science, such as that due to Kuhn (1970) and Daston & Galison (2007), to suggest that scientists in different historical periods (or ‘paradigms’) have employed different epistemic concepts. While this would entail a form of epistemic pluralism, it is not always clear whether this is what the relevant writers have in mind. Kuhn, in particular, tends to focus on the idea that different scientists accept different *standards* for justification, by which he seems to mean that they have different views about when a belief (or theory, etc.) is justified. If anything, this arguably presupposes that the relevant scientists have a *shared* concept of justification (since otherwise it would be a kind of play on words to say that they both accept standards of ‘justification’). And although Kuhn’s so-called ‘incommensurability thesis’ is sometimes taken to imply that certain central terms cannot be translated from one theory to another, his examples of such terms tend to be

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<sup>12</sup> Alston prefers to put his point in terms of whether there is a unique property that ‘justified’ picks out, rather than in terms of whether there are many justification-like concepts (see further Alston, 2005: 27–28). This makes no difference for present purposes.

<sup>13</sup> Another difference between Alston’s and Haslanger’s discussions and mine is that Alston and Haslanger do not seem to take seriously the possibility of pluralism about *all* epistemic concepts. Having registered their worries about focusing on the concepts of justification and knowledge, respectively, Alston proceeds to focus on a notion of ‘epistemic evaluation’ (Alston, 2005: 29) instead, and Haslanger focuses on a notion of what is ‘cognitively valuable’, apparently assuming that such a focus avoids their worries. By contrast, though I focus on the concept of knowledge, the kind of pluralist thesis that interests me here concerns all epistemic concepts, including those of epistemic and cognitive value.

empirical ones (such as ‘space’, ‘time’, and ‘mass’ as used in Newtonian and Einsteinian physics, respectively; see Kuhn, 1970: 101–102) rather than epistemic ones.<sup>14</sup>

Once we see clearly enough what epistemic pluralism says, I take it to be at least sufficiently plausible that it is of interest to see how its truth would affect debates in epistemology, and the debate about radical skepticism in particular.<sup>15</sup> Hence, in what follows, I will simply assume that it is true. However, before proceeding, it is worth briefly outlining two ways in which this view could be supported.

The first way is straightforward: Many plausible theories about concepts and properties suggest that epistemic pluralism (or at least some relevantly similar view) is true. This includes typical versions of platonism about properties and abstracta more generally (see, e.g., Linsky & Zalta, 1995), on which (roughly) there are as many abstract objects (including concepts) that there could coherently be, as well as the view of properties as sets of possibilities (see, e.g., Lewis, 1983), on which (roughly) there is a property corresponding to each set of possible objects. One might think that sparse theories of properties, such as Armstrong’s (1980) theory of universals, are an exception. However, proponents of such views typically hold that a predicate can be true of things even if it does not refer or correspond to a

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<sup>14</sup> The question of how Kuhn’s view should be understood is complicated by the fact that it, and the incommensurability thesis in particular, appears to change over the years, ranging from being apparently very radical (e.g., that “the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds” and thus “see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction” (Kuhn, 1970: 150)) to being apparently very modest (e.g., that there is “some difference in some meanings of some words [that theories] have in common” (in Suppe, 1974: 506)). For helpful presentation and discussion of this point, see Sankey (1993).

<sup>15</sup> Epistemic pluralism may well have important implications for other debates as well. One example concerns the question of whether it is morally wrong to convict and punish defendants on the basis of statistical evidence. Littlejohn (2020) argues that this is wrong on the ground that beliefs based on such evidence do not amount to knowledge. Papineu (2021) agrees that knowledge cannot be based on purely statistical evidence, but argues that this is a reason to abandon our concept of knowledge. If Littlejohn and Papineu are right that knowledge cannot be based on statistical evidence, an interesting question is whether it might be preferable to use knowledge-like concepts that relate to statistical evidence in a different way in legal contexts.

universal.<sup>16</sup> For example, even if *gamehood* is not a universal, it would be radical to hold that there are no true sentences of the form ‘*G* is a game’. And as mentioned earlier (sect. 2), for present purposes it makes no difference if we formulate the discussion in terms of predicates rather than concepts or properties. In other words, given a sparse view of concepts and/or properties, we could simply transpose the discussion by focusing on different possible, relevantly similar meanings of ‘knows’.

A second way of supporting epistemic pluralism appeals to the fact that some early studies in experimental philosophy could be taken to suggest that different people not only *could* have had different knowledge-like concepts, but that this is *actually* the case (see, e.g., Weinberg, Nichols & Stich, 2001). On this idea, the meaning of sentences of the form ‘*S* knows that *p*’ (and of corresponding sentences in other languages) can vary depending on factors such as the speaker’s cultural background, socioeconomic status, and the like. These studies have been criticized (see, e.g., J. Nagel, 2012; Kim & Yuan, 2015), and for all I want to argue here, those criticisms may well be correct. The point is just that these questions seem to be empirical and contingent ones. In other words, even if everyone on Earth in fact has the same knowledge-like concept, it is plausible that things could at least have *turned out* differently. And this is all that is needed for the plausibility of epistemic pluralism as I understand it here.

#### **4. Pluralism and Skepticism**

To begin exploring the consequences that epistemic pluralism has for the debate about skepticism, let us first consider a simple, familiar argument for skepticism about the external world. (I use this argument only for illustration; the points I am about to make can also be made in relation to other skeptical arguments, and other forms of skepticism.) The argument departs from the worry that our beliefs about the external world might be radically mistaken because we are in fact dreaming, hallucinating, brains in vats, deceived by a demon, or subject to some other distorting factor that we could not possibly detect. If we cannot rule out the

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<sup>16</sup> Armstrong achieves this result by positing so-called ‘second-rate properties’, whose instantiation supervenes upon the instantiations of universals (Armstrong, 2010: 20–21).

truth of such skeptical hypotheses, the thought goes, then we also cannot know anything that requires that such hypotheses are false. This argument can be formulated as follows:

**P1.** I do not know whether I am a brain in a vat.

**P2.** If P1 is true, then I do not know that I have hands (or any other proposition whose truth requires that I am not a brain in a vat).

**C.** Therefore: I do not know that I have hands (or any other proposition whose truth requires that I am not a brain in a vat).

The question of whether this argument is sound need not concern us here. Instead, what is notable is that given epistemic pluralism, there are *some* knowledge-like concepts in terms of which we can formulate corresponding arguments that *are* sound, and other knowledge-like concepts in terms of which we cannot do that. Let us say that these knowledge-like concepts are *skepticism-friendly* and *skepticism-unfriendly*, respectively. As an example of a skepticism-friendly concept, let us introduce the concept KNOWLEDGE<sub>IND</sub> (where ‘IND’ stands for ‘indistinguishable’). A belief that *p* satisfies this concept if and only if *p* is true and the subject can, on the basis of how things seem to her, distinguish between the truth of all hypotheses that entail *p* and the truth of all hypotheses that entail *not-p*. Exactly which beliefs that can satisfy this concept is not obvious, and for present purposes not important—what matters is that our beliefs about the external world *cannot* satisfy it, even if they are true. In other words, whether or not we are brains in vats, we cannot on the basis of appearances distinguish between that hypothesis and the anti-skeptical hypothesis that everything is mostly as it seems. I take it that both skeptics and anti-skeptics typically agree to this much.

On the other hand, KNOWLEDGE<sub>C</sub> is an example of a skepticism-unfriendly concept, since in order to satisfy it, a belief merely has to be true and caused by the fact that it represents (see sect. 3). We can have knowledge<sub>C</sub>, in other words, even if we cannot have knowledge<sub>IND</sub>, since all that knowledge<sub>C</sub> requires is that the world cooperates, by ensuring that our beliefs are caused in the right way.

What should one make of all this? One possible reaction (which I speculate that some readers will have) is to say: ‘Who cares about knowledge<sub>IND</sub>, knowledge<sub>C</sub>, and the rest—what matters is *knowledge*!’ This line of thought can be found in many discussions about skepticism; indeed, as Sally Haslanger notes, “[t]he main anti-skeptical strategy of 20th century epistemology” is to appeal to “our actual knowledge practices” to argue against skepticism (Haslanger, 1999: 461). That said, in some cases this strategy is more explicit than in others. A clear statement of it comes from Barry Stroud, who asserts that “we have no notion of knowledge other than what is embodied in [everyday and scientific] procedures and practices” (1984: 31), and claims that for this reason, the question that matters in the context of skepticism is whether our beliefs satisfy this notion. In other cases it is less obvious that our ordinary epistemic notions are assumed to be especially important in this way. But this assumption can be brought out. For example, consider the influential contextualist idea that the meaning of ‘knowledge’ (and its cognates) ensures that in some contexts, we can truly say that we know claims about the external world, even though we cannot truly say so in contexts in which skeptical hypotheses are raised (for versions of contextualism, see, e.g., DeRose, 1992; Lewis, 1996; Cohen, 1999). This idea has often been said to deal with skepticism, since it allows that we can at least make true knowledge ascriptions in everyday life. However, as this is a view about natural language semantics, its truth depends on the contingent question of how we use certain words. Hence, this view deals with skepticism only if we assume that what matters in this context is whether our beliefs satisfy the concept expressed by ‘knows’ in ordinary discourse. And this assumption is exactly the one made by Stroud.<sup>17</sup>

Given pluralism, however, this assumption can be questioned. What supports thinking that it is so important how *our* concept of knowledge works? After all, if pluralism is true, there are a plethora of similar but distinct concepts that we could study instead. Hence,

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<sup>17</sup> Similar points apply to other semantically oriented responses to global skepticism, such as the expressivist-inspired view recently suggested by Field (2018), and to semantically oriented responses to more local forms of skepticism, concerning, e.g., moral beliefs in particular (for a recent example, see Perl (2020), who argues that paying attention to the semantic and pragmatic details of ordinary knowledge ascriptions helps moral realists avoid skeptical challenges to their view).

at a minimum, the idea that our concept of knowledge is the most important one requires positive argument. However, not only are such arguments usually not provided—it is also hard to imagine what they might even look like.

Stroud does hint at an argument in the passage quoted above, claiming that the ordinary notion of knowledge is the only notion that we ‘have’. However, as I noted earlier (sect. 3), even if this is the only knowledge-like notion that we *in fact* have, it is much more difficult to argue that it is the only notion that we *could have* had. And if this is so, the mere fact that our concept of knowledge is the one that we *happen to use* surely carries no weight. It is simply implausible that whether we are genuinely better or worse off with regard to skeptical threats ultimately turns on contingent facts about how we happen to speak or think.<sup>18</sup> (Compare: If it turns out that French people and Finnish people employ different knowledge-like concepts, with the French concept being easier to satisfy than the Finnish one, surely we would not take that to motivate any substantial philosophical conclusions about whether French people are better off with respect to skeptical threats!<sup>19</sup>)

Another way to bring out the problem with focusing only on our actual concept of knowledge is by considering what philosophers have thought to be at stake in the debate about skepticism. To take a historical example, Hume’s skeptical conclusions led him to a state of “philosophical melancholy and delirium”, in which he began to “fancy [himself] in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ’d with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty” (1739: book 1, part 4, section 7). Along the same lines, Thomas Nagel proposes that radical skepticism resembles “philosophical perception of the absurd” (1971: 722), on the ground that when we realize that our ordinary beliefs are “incompatible with possibilities that we have no grounds for believing do not obtain”, we do not abandon them; instead, we return to them with “irony and resignation” (1971: 724). And

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<sup>18</sup> Objections along these lines have sometimes been made to linguistically oriented epistemological theories such as contextualism (see, e.g., Sosa, 2000). However, even if one focuses on knowledge rather than on the word ‘knowledge’ (and its cognates), the points just made still apply. Again, whether some concept or property can truly be said to be the concept or property of *knowledge* is hostage to the meaning of ‘knowledge’ in the language that we are currently speaking (cf. sects. 2–3).

<sup>19</sup> Thanks here to Matti Eklund.

Eli Hirsch suggests that skeptical reflections invite a kind of troubled state that resembles our feelings about death—a “distinctive form of epistemic anxiety the object of which cannot possibly be faced or literalistically expressed” (2018: 3–4; for the comparison with death, see Hirsch, 2009, and Hirsch, 2018: 150). Less skeptically, Timothy Williamson claims that skepticism is “a disease in which healthy mental processes run pathologically unchecked” (2007: 681), and Duncan Pritchard proposes that although skepticism invites an “existential” kind of “epistemic angst” (2005: 204; see also Pritchard 2015), there is a “cure” available, in the form of an adequate view of knowledge (2015: 184). Whether or not we agree with the skeptics or the anti-skeptics here, the point is just that remarks of this kind seem entirely off-track if the central question raised by skeptical challenges is one that ultimately concerns contingent facts about how we happen to speak or think. It is hard to see why it would be particularly absurd or anxiety-inducing (etc.) to think merely that we use ‘knows’ and its cognates in one way rather than another. To make sense of remarks of this kind, then, we must apparently take the debate about skepticism to concern something more substantial.

The same point can also be made by a comparison with metaphysics. Following Nelson Goodman (1955), let us say that an object is *grue* if and only if it is either green and examined before some time *t*, or blue and not so examined. Let us further say that an object is *bleen* if and only if it is either blue and examined before some time *t*, or green and not so examined. Consider now an alien community who represents the world in terms of what is *grue* and *bleen* rather than in terms of what is blue and green. A currently popular view is that although it is *true* that certain things are *grue* and *bleen*, thinkers who represent the world in such terms nonetheless fail to draw the most metaphysically significant distinctions that there are (e.g., Sider, 2011). While different things can be said for and against this view, it would surely be unconvincing to object to it that the notions of *grueness* and *bleeness* must be metaphysically significant because they are the only color notions that the aliens ‘have’. Plausibly, what makes this objection unconvincing is that it does not matter what concepts they *in fact* have—what matters is that they could have had other concepts with which they could have drawn more metaphysically significant distinctions. And once we acknowledge that the aliens could end up in such a predicament, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that

at least in principle, the same could be true of us—both with regard to our color concepts and with regard to our epistemic ones.

If these points are accepted, several new questions arise. (Again, these questions can be formulated for all our epistemic concepts; I will keep mostly focusing on knowledge, but only for simplicity.) Rather than—or: in addition to—asking what knowledge requires, we can ask:

**Q1:** Is there any knowledge-like concept that is somehow epistemically privileged, or epistemically more important than other similar concepts?

Let us introduce ‘KNOWLEDGE+’ as a name for the most important knowledge-like concept (assuming, for the moment, that there is such a concept). Using this terminology, we can formulate further new questions:

**Q2:** Is KNOWLEDGE+ skepticism-friendly or skepticism-unfriendly?

**Q3:** Can we know which knowledge-like concept that is most important?

**Q4:** Can we *know+* which knowledge-like concept that is most important?

In relation to Q2, two new epistemological views can be introduced. According to *thoroughgoing skepticism*, we cannot have knowledge+ about claims about the external world (such as the claim that we have hands). According to *thoroughgoing anti-skepticism*, we can have knowledge+ about such claims.<sup>20</sup> (Both these views thus presuppose an affirmative answer to Q1.) It is clear, I take it, that these views should be seen as forms of skepticism and of anti-skepticism, respectively. But neither of these views entail that the *ordinary concept*

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<sup>20</sup> For ease of exposition, I take these views to imply that there is a *unique* most important knowledge-like concept. But this is strictly speaking not essential; thoroughgoing skepticism would be as much of a worry if many distinct skepticism-friendly knowledge-like concepts are tied for being most important. (An interesting possibility is that some skepticism-friendly concepts and some skepticism-unfriendly concepts could be tied for being most important. It is not clear whether the skeptic or the anti-skeptic should be taken to ‘win’ if that turns out to be the case.)

KNOWLEDGE is identical to KNOWLEDGE+. For this reason, they are also neutral on whether our beliefs about the external world amount to knowledge. In this sense, thoroughgoing skepticism remains a threat even if it is *granted* (if only for the sake of argument) that we have knowledge of the external world.

In at least one respect, thoroughgoing skepticism and thoroughgoing anti-skepticism are both improvements over epistemological views that are formulated in terms of knowledge, or other ordinary epistemic notions. All such views are held hostage to contingent facts about how we happen to speak or think, and as I have argued, it is hard to see how such facts could be what determines whether we are genuinely better or worse off with regard to skeptical threats. The thoroughgoing views avoid this problem.

Q3 and Q4 can both be used to formulate interesting skeptical worries. (These are not the worries I will focus on, but they are nonetheless worth noting.) According to one worry, which corresponds to a negative answer to Q3, there may well be a knowledge-like concept that is most important, but we have no way of knowing which one that is.<sup>21</sup> We might hope that it is ours—but the challenge is to justify that verdict. According to another worry, which corresponds to a negative answer to Q4, there may well be a knowledge-like concept that is most important, and we might even *know* which one that is, but we cannot *know+* which one that is (where KNOWLEDGE+ is assumed to be more significant than KNOWLEDGE). One might reasonably have doubts about our ability to have knowledge and/or knowledge+ about these rather unfamiliar questions, even if one does not doubt our ability to have knowledge and/or knowledge+ in general.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Eklund (2017: 22) briefly mentions a corresponding skeptical challenge about our ability to know whether the concepts GOOD and RIGHT are in some way privileged over alternative normative concepts.

<sup>22</sup> A way to motivate both these skeptical worries is by noting that when evaluating epistemic concepts, there is a risk of a problematic kind of circularity. This might seem to be a threat to the possibility of justified belief (or justified+ belief), and thus to knowledge (or knowledge+), about the relevant questions. In a recent paper, McPherson & Plunkett (2021) focus on a related worry, which they call the ‘vindicatory circularity challenge’. McPherson & Plunkett note that just like it seems problematic to use a certain ruler to check the accuracy of that ruler itself, “[i]t might seem misguided in just the same way to seek to vindicate one of your normative concepts by testing it against itself” (2021). To illustrate, suppose we consider the relative merits of some justification-like concepts and wish to argue that one

## 5. Meta-Skepticism

Importantly, however, all questions formulated above rest on a crucial presupposition: That the idea that certain knowledge-like concepts are privileged or more important *even make sense*. And this too can be questioned:

**Q5:** What does it even *mean to say* that some knowledge-like concepts are epistemically privileged, or more important than others?

This question can be used to introduce the form of skepticism that I will call *meta-skepticism*. The views formulated towards the end of section 4 all require that we can make good sense of the claim that some knowledge-like concept is privileged (or, equivalently, that some knowledge-like concept deserves the name 'KNOWLEDGE+'). And it is this assumption that meta-skepticism targets: According to this view, the idea that some knowledge-like concepts are genuinely epistemically more important than others simply makes no sense. If we cannot make sense of this idea, then we must accept that there simply are different knowledge-like concepts out there, with nothing that genuinely favors the skepticism-unfriendly ones over the skepticism-friendly ones. Our beliefs about the external world might satisfy *some* knowledge-like concepts, but there are many other equally real, not less important knowledge-like concepts that those beliefs *cannot* satisfy. And this seems to be a sort of parity that a genuine non-skeptic should want to avoid. She should want to say that *it does not matter* if our beliefs fail to satisfy the skepticism-friendly knowledge-like concepts, since there are

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of them, JUSTIFICATION\*, is most important. Suppose further that in this context, we also choose to *use* this concept. In effect, then, arguing that JUSTIFICATION\* is privileged would amount to arguing that this verdict can be *justified\**. And this seems to involve a form of circularity, since even if JUSTIFICATION\* might in this sense 'endorse itself', the verdict that JUSTIFICATION\* is privileged might still fail to be justified\*\* (where JUSTIFICATION\* ≠ JUSTIFICATION\*\*). McPherson and Plunkett argue that this challenge can be met by transposing resources from the debate about seemingly-circular responses to more traditional forms of skepticism, which, some argue, are ultimately acceptable. In contrast, as I argue below, standard anti-skeptical resources cannot be used to address the skeptical challenge that I will focus on.

some skepticism-unfriendly knowledge-like concepts that are epistemically more important. In terms of the remarks considered above (section 4), she should want to say that our epistemic situation is not as deplorable or absurd (etc.) as Hume, Nagel, and other skeptically inclined writers have worried that it might be, since our beliefs can satisfy the knowledge-like concept that matters. The meta-skeptical challenge is thus to make sense of this idea.

We can compare this dialectical context to the one that concerns more traditional forms of skepticism. In that context, Crispin Wright has noted that a skeptic “does not need to win but only to draw” (1991: 89). He expands:

...the conclusion of a sceptical argument which purports to show not indeed that none of our cherished beliefs about some subject matter is justified but merely that there is no justification for thinking otherwise, loses little in disquieting power to the stronger claim. If I find it totally unacceptable to think that none of my opinions about the external world, for instance, has any ground, it is hardly a comfort to be told that the case has been overstated—that it is merely that I have no justification for thinking that the situation is any better than that. (1991: 89)

Wright’s point, I take it, is that if we have no reason to *accept* the premises of a skeptical argument, that fact is cold comfort for a non-skeptic if we also have no reason to *deny* those premises. In other words, if there is nothing that favors a non-skeptical view, then it does not help the non-skeptic if nothing favors a skeptical view either. And the point is that a corresponding claim is plausible also in the current context. If the notion of certain concepts being epistemically more important than others simply makes no sense, and there is thus nothing that privileges the skepticism-unfriendly concepts, then it is cold comfort for a non-skeptic if nothing privileges the skepticism-friendly concepts either. It is for this reason that meta-skepticism is itself best viewed as a form of skepticism.

One important way in which the meta-skeptical challenge differs from traditional skeptical ones is that the latter usually focus on the *satisfiability* of some epistemic concepts (such as KNOWLEDGE or JUSTIFICATION) while the former focuses on their *status*. For this

reason, there is no straightforward way in which familiar anti-skeptical resources can be used to answer the meta-skeptical challenge.<sup>23</sup> As an example, consider the idea that knowledge only requires a certain kind of causal contact with the world, which we might have even though we cannot rule out the truth of skeptical hypotheses on the basis of how things appear to us (i.e., that knowledge amounts to  $\text{knowledge}_c$  rather than  $\text{knowledge}_{\text{IND}}$ ; cf. sects. 3 and 4). There is no straightforward way in which this idea could be used to address the question of what it means to say that a certain skepticism-unfriendly knowledge-like concept is more significant than the skepticism-friendly knowledge-like concepts. (Understanding this in terms of whether we are in causal contact with certain concepts rather than others is clearly a non-starter.) Similar things can be said about other anti-skeptical strategies, such as the ‘dogmatist’ one according to which if it seems to us that  $p$ , then all things equal, we are justified in believing that  $p$  (see, e.g., Pryor, 2000)—it is hard to see how this appeal to appearances could be used to make sense of the claim that skepticism-unfriendly concepts are more important than skepticism-friendly ones.

Here is an analogy to illustrate the point just made. In metaethics, there is a well-known ‘amoralist’ challenge that concerns (roughly) why we should care about what morality requires of us.<sup>24</sup> Many responses to this challenge have been offered. But here is a response that, I take it, is obviously unsatisfactory: An action is morally right if it maximizes total well-being. The reason that this response is unsatisfactory is that the amoralist does not even *question* the idea that morality demands that we act in certain ways—what she questions is why those demands should be taken to have the importance that we normally assign to them. Similarly, just like the act-consequentialist response just outlined, typical anti-skeptical resources are ‘first-order’ in the sense that they seek to provide sufficient conditions for the satisfaction of some epistemic concept (e.g., that of knowledge) and establish that at least some

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<sup>23</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this important issue.

<sup>24</sup> There are complications in even formulating the challenge, since it seems to assume that there is something like an ‘all things considered-ought’ which can be used to evaluate the significance of moral demands. And this idea too can be questioned; see, e.g., Copp (1997), Tiffany (2007), Baker (2018), and Risberg (forthcoming) for further discussion.

of our beliefs meet those conditions. Such strategies are toothless when it comes to ‘second-order’ challenges, like the meta-skeptical one, that focus on the status of our epistemic concepts rather than their satisfiability.<sup>25</sup>

To answer the meta-skeptical challenge, then, we need make sense of the idea that some knowledge-like concepts are epistemically privileged. In what follows, I will consider some different ways to do so, and suggest that they are all problematic. Thus, I will conclude that it is unclear whether the challenge can be met.

I will employ one adequacy constraint on answers to this challenge, which is that they must do justice to the idea that the relevant kind of importance is precisely *epistemic* in some sense. Of course, a pluralist about KNOWLEDGE can simply be a pluralist about EPISTEMIC as well, so we cannot pretend that invoking a concept of the epistemic is going to *solve* any problems.<sup>26</sup> The point is just that a response to the meta-skeptical challenge is bound to fail if it invokes a form of importance that is recognizably *too far from* being epistemic. For example, it would obviously be unsatisfactory to respond to the challenge by arguing merely that KNOWLEDGE is *legally* important (in some jurisdiction or other). That claim about legal importance may well be true, but it does not help address any *epistemological* worries about the status of this concept.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Notice that the meta-skeptical challenge is also distinct from the question that is central in the literature concerning the value of knowledge, which primarily focuses on whether knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief (for an overview, see, e.g., Pritchard, Turri & Carter, 2018). The difference is that the relevant comparison here is not between knowledge and mere true belief, but between our concept of knowledge and other similar concepts. Thanks here to an anonymous reviewer.

<sup>26</sup> See further Cohen (2016), who urges caution against relying too heavily on our understanding of the technical term ‘epistemic’, and argues that in some debates this term has not been given a clear-enough meaning. See also McPherson & Plunkett (2020) for a general discussion of whether we should focus on folk concepts or theoretical concepts in the context of conceptual engineering.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Simion (2018), who discusses ‘wrong kind of reason’-problems (cf. Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2004) in the context of conceptual engineering. One of Simion’s points is that even if there would be economic advantages in modifying our concept DEER, it “[i]ntuitively... does not seem right” (she thinks) to modify the concept in light of such considerations (2018: 921). Simion apparently grants, however, that if the reasons of the wrong kind are strong enough (e.g., “if the life of millions is at stake”; 2018: 924), they might all-things-considered justify conceptual change; her point seems to be that even so, the “resulting concept will not be a better concept” (2018: 924).

### 5.1 *The Trivial Interpretation*

One straightforward way to understand the relevant notion of importance can immediately be set aside, as it is clearly unsatisfactory. According to this idea, to say that a knowledge-like concept is important is just to say that it distinguishes between beliefs that are *knowledge* and beliefs that are not. The problem with this suggestion is that rather than giving content to the idea that KNOWLEDGE is important, it merely presupposes that this idea is true. More exactly, if it is important to distinguish between knowledge and other kinds of belief, then this is presumably because knowledge is *itself* important. But then we are still in the dark about what it means to say this, which is the question that was posed. This question is thus one that the trivial interpretation cannot answer.

Much the same can be said about attempts to address the challenge by appeal to other epistemic concepts that we actually have. For instance, if it is suggested that knowledge is important in the sense that it is conducive to understanding, then this seems to presuppose that understanding is important—and then similar questions can be raised about why UNDERSTANDING, rather than alternative understanding-like concepts, deserves our attention.

### 5.2 *Other Domestic Interpretations*

Other interpretations of the relevant notion of importance resemble the trivial one in that they also focus on considerations about us and what we are in fact like. For example, one possible suggestion is that to say that a knowledge-like concept is important is to say that it best captures what we are interested in when we engage in debates about skepticism, or in epistemological debates more generally. (Since it is potentially an open question whether our ordinary concept of knowledge best does so, this idea leaves open that the ordinary concept might not be the most important one.) An alternative suggestion is that to say that a knowledge-like concept is important is to say that we were in some sense *bound* to have it. For example, one can imagine biological or psychological conjectures to the effect that we are the kind of creatures that very probably, or even inevitably, would end up using a knowledge-like concept like ours (at least unless we consciously decided to abandon it).

The first thing to note about these suggestions is that when it comes to the case of GRUE and BLEEN, parallel considerations appear to be irrelevant. Recall the alien community who represents the world in such terms, rather than in terms of what is blue and green. Let us make the further assumptions that the concepts GRUE and BLEEN best capture what members of that community are interested in when they think and speak of color-like questions, and, moreover, that their biology and psychology ensure that they could not easily have had different concepts. Given these assumptions, their concepts of GRUE and BLEEN may well have *some* considerations going for them. (For example, given what the aliens are like and what they care about, it might lie in their interest to study grueness and bleeness rather than blueness and greenness.) Even so, however, the impression remains that in so doing, the properties they study are not metaphysically joint-carving.

For similar reasons, considerations that concern what we are in fact like seem to carry little weight in the epistemic case as well. The problem is that, just like in the case of the aliens, it seems that it could at least in principle turn out that what we care about, or what we are bound to think about, is something that is epistemically unimportant. But on the current suggestion, for a knowledge-like concept to be important simply *is* for it to capture what we care about, or to be one that we were bound to have.

### 5.3 *The Constitutivist Strategy*

An especially ambitious variation on the idea just considered is known as *constitutivism* in the literature (see, e.g., Ferrero, 2009; Korsgaard, 2009; Smith, 2015; Velleman, 2009).<sup>28</sup> While this view can be formulated in different ways, the central idea is that normativity (either in the practical domain or the theoretical domain or both) can be grounded in the rules or norms that in some sense are ‘constitutive of agency’. To illustrate, some rules are commonly held to be constitutive of the game of chess; e.g., ‘Do not move the rook diagonally!’. This rule can be taken to bind every chess player in the sense that if one does not abide by it, one simply is not playing chess anymore. If there are similarly rules that are constitutive of being an agent, then,

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<sup>28</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to discuss constitutivist views in more detail.

one might think, those rules would similarly be binding for all agents. The core constitutivist idea is that these rules can provide the foundation of morality, rationality, and other types of normative assessments.

While constitutivists do not usually focus on the status of our concepts in the same way that the meta-skeptical challenge does, it is possible to apply their strategy in this context. For instance, suppose one thinks that it is constitutive of being an agent that one has beliefs, and that the so-called ‘aim of belief’ is knowledge (cf., e.g., Williamson 2000).<sup>29</sup> These claims might be taken to suggest that a norm such as ‘Do not believe that  $p$  unless you know that  $p$ !’ is constitutive of agency, and in that sense binding for all agents. And this might in turn seem to reveal a sense in which KNOWLEDGE is more important than other knowledge-like concepts: Unlike other nearby notions, knowledge is essentially involved in what it is to be an agent.

An important challenge for ambitious constitutivist views of normativity is the ‘shmagency problem’ (Enoch 2006). The question of whether constitutivists can solve this problem is the subject of an ongoing debate, and I will not take a stand on it here—what I wish to note is just that a shmagency problem also arises for constitutivist responses to the meta-skeptical challenge.<sup>30</sup> In short, the problem is that even if one can establish that certain rules are constitutive of agency, this does not by itself secure that those rules have a special status unless one can also establish that there is something special about agency itself. As an analogy, the rule that forbids moving the rook diagonally obviously does not have a special normative status, since the game that it is constitutive of—chess—does not have a such a status either. So why think agency is different in this regard? In particular, why not be a ‘shmagent’ instead of an agent, where a shmagent is an agent-like entity that is bound by

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<sup>29</sup> The suggestion that knowledge is the aim of belief is controversial, and I consider it here only as an illustration. A popular alternative view is that the aim of belief is *truth*; see, e.g., Wedgwood (2002) for a constitutivist view along those lines. For discussion of how the metaphor of the aim of belief is best understood, see the essays in Chan (2013).

<sup>30</sup> For some constitutivist responses to the shmagency objection, see, e.g., Paakkunainen (2018) and Silverstein (2015). For defenses of the objection, see Enoch (2011), Leffler (2019), and Tiffany (2012). Clarke-Doane (2020: 168) briefly considers the objection in the context of pluralism about normative concepts.

different constitutive rules? Indeed, even if one grants that there is some essential connection between agency and knowledge (which is itself a strong assumption), the pluralist can always cook up a distinct agency-like concept that is essentially connected to a distinct knowledge-like concept. So the constitutivist strategy simply pushes the question one step back: What is special about the concept of agency that we happen to have?

A prominent constitutivist idea, which might be taken to provide an answer to this question, is that agency is in some sense *inescapable* for us.<sup>31</sup> If this idea is correct, it might seem to highlight an important difference between agency and playing chess. However, it has been difficult to make this idea both plausible and precise.<sup>32</sup> In particular, as Tiffany (2012) argues, it is especially difficult to defend the inescapability claim while also seeking to derive relatively *substantive* norms from one's conception of agency, as most constitutivists seek to do. For this reason, Tiffany argues that constitutivists risk committing a kind of equivocation: They need a minimal conception of agency to defend the inescapability claim, but a richer conception of agency to derive their favored substantive norms. This point is especially relevant in the current context, as it is closely related to the idea that there are many different agency-like concepts (for related discussion, see Tiffany, 2012: 226–228).

To illustrate the points just made, suppose first that one defends a fairly minimal conception of agency, on which engaging in something that even remotely resembles deliberation suffices for being an agent. This conception can be taken to suggest that agency is inescapable in the sense that if one even *considers the question* of whether to be an agent rather than a shmagent, then one is already an agent, and thus subject to the norms that are

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<sup>31</sup> This idea has been prominent in responses to Enoch's original formulation of the shmagency problem; see, e.g., Ferrero (2018) and the references therein. For an alternative constitutivist answer, see Silverstein (2015).

<sup>32</sup> For one, we can obviously cease to be agents by killing ourselves. Moreover, on many views of personal identity, we can exist without being agents, and thus agency is not essential to us; for example, we might be organisms that exist (as fetuses) before becoming conscious (Olson 1997), or bodies that can exist (as corpses) after death (F. Feldman 2000).

constitutive of agency.<sup>33</sup> If this is correct, the attempt to formulate the shmagency challenge might in some sense be self-defeating or incoherent, since only agents (who are already subject to the norms of agency) can formulate it in the first place. But it is more difficult to argue that agency, conceived of in this minimal way, supports certain substantive norms—e.g., norms that tell us to seek knowledge rather than knowledge\*. In particular, even if knowledge is the aim of belief, one might be able to engage in something that remotely resembles deliberation while having some other belief-like, broadly representational mental state with a different ‘aim’, such as truth (cf. Wedgwood 2002), justification (cf. R. Feldman 2002), or even knowledge\*.

On the other hand, suppose one has a more demanding idea of agency—e.g., that being an agent essentially involves aiming at a rich kind of ‘self-constitution’ (cf. Korsgaard, 2009). It is easier to use this conception of agency to provide support for substantive constitutive norms, given that one’s actions and attitudes might be more or less successful in ‘constituting oneself’. But it is less plausible that agency, thus understood, is inescapable in some relevant sense (such as the one outlined above). After all, one can plausibly engage in deliberation and other agency-like activities, and thus formulate the shmagency challenge, while being entirely indifferent to self-constitution (cf. Ferrero, 2009: 320). And then the question of why we should care about agency rather than shmagency remains.

#### 5.4 *The Metaphysical Interpretation*

The recurring comparison with the notions of grue and bleen might lead one to think that the analogy with metaphysics goes all the way. In other words, on this idea, we should give a *metaphysical* interpretation of the idea that some knowledge-like concepts are more important than others. Above I considered the view that although it is true that some things are grue and bleen, these concepts nonetheless fail to be metaphysically *joint-carving* (as it is sometimes

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Ferrero (2018: 127): “agency is *inescapable*: there is no place ‘outside’ of agency whence one could raise the question whether one has reason to be an agent.” Ferrero calls this ‘intentional or rational’ agency (2018: 127), and also considers other ways to understand inescapability.

put).<sup>34</sup> Correspondingly, one might think that what it means for some knowledge-like concept to be more important than others is that it is more metaphysically joint-carving, just like BLUE and GREEN are intuitively more metaphysically joint-carving than GRUE and BLEEN.<sup>35</sup>

The main problem with this proposal is that it seems to conflate metaphysical and epistemological forms of importance. In particular, even if some knowledge-like concepts are *metaphysically* special, this does not by itself ensure that they are also *epistemologically* special. For this reason, this proposal violates the adequacy constraint formulated earlier.

To see this, it will help to consider some related points made by Matti Eklund (2017), who focuses on problems that arise if a kind of pluralist thesis about normative concepts is true. One of the problems is roughly this. Given normative pluralism, our concept OUGHT is not the only ought-like concept that exists—there are also many other such concepts. If this is

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<sup>34</sup> Some writers have found the idea of joint-carvingness suspicious (e.g., Hirsch, 2013), and even suspicious on pluralist grounds (Dasgupta, 2018). But since I am here only interested in whether the notion of metaphysical joint-carvingness can figure in a plausible interpretation of the idea of epistemic importance, I will simply assume that it is in good standing.

<sup>35</sup> This proposal resembles an idea suggested by Enoch & McPherson (2017: 835–836) in a critique of Scanlon’s (2014) metaethical views. Roughly, Enoch & McPherson worry that Scanlon’s view implies the truth of a kind of *normative* pluralism (see below) and thus fails to accommodate the idea that people who focus on ‘schmeasons’ rather than reasons “[...] are like people who have the concept GRUE rather than GREEN: their way of thinking about reality is *inapt*” (Enoch & McPherson, 2017: 835).

A related idea has been presented by Dunaway & McPherson (2016), who suggest that naturalist realists about normativity (roughly, those who think there are objective normative facts that do not differ in kind from the facts studied by the sciences) can invoke the notion of joint-carvingness to avoid the ‘Moral Twin Earth challenge’ (Horgan & Timmons 1992) to their view. The challenge focuses on the metasemantical assumptions that are congenial to naturalist realism, and seeks to show that those assumptions imply that some apparently genuine normative disagreements are merely verbal disagreements. In this way, the Moral Twin Earth challenge differs from the one presented here, which is independent of metasemantical questions about when and whether users of epistemic terms talk past each other (cf. sects. 2–3).

For further related discussion, see also Sundell (2016; esp. 242–243), who proposes that a certain kind of metaphysical realist should say that joint-carving concepts are epistemically better, and Perez Carballo (2020), who argues that metaphysical joint-carvingness is irrelevant to how epistemically good a concept is. Note however that both Sundell and Perez Carballo focus mostly on the epistemic evaluation of *non-epistemic* concepts, such as SPECIES and GRUE, rather than the evaluation of epistemic concepts, such as KNOWLEDGE.

true, we might again want to ask questions that resemble those that I considered above, such as: What is so great about the ought-like concept that we happen to use? Perhaps we ought to use another ought-like concept instead? However, there are obvious problems in formulating this question, since we are employing an ought-like concept when doing so. Thus, perhaps it turns out that although we ought to use OUGHT, there is also some other ought-like concept—call it ‘OUGHT\*’—such that we ought\* to use OUGHT\*. If this holds, there seems to be a remaining “Further Question”, as Eklund puts it (2017: 23), one in the neighborhood of whether what we ought to do or what we ought\* to do is *really* what we ought to do. But it is not clear how this question should be understood.

Eklund considers the idea that the further question concerns joint-carvingness (or ‘eliteness’, which is the term that he uses), and dismisses it as follows:

Suppose first that by eliteness one means something like what is sometimes called *Lewisian* eliteness: the perfectly elite properties are the fundamental physical properties, and something is more elite than something else the closer to this ideal it is. [...] Consider two different communities with different aesthetic predicates—for example, they may have different, non-coextensive predicates “tasty.” Suppose further that the tastes of one community are such that the extension of “tasty” in their mouths is more metaphysically elite, for example because there is one particular chemical element, say *sodium*, such that they like—*gustatorily* like—food and drink that contains this chemical in sufficient quantities, so the referent of their “tasty” is more elite. To take this to be relevant to which community objectively has the aesthetically better taste would clearly be unwarranted. The issues are simply different. Correspondingly, the same goes for other normative disputes, including, for example, moral disputes. [...] The general take-home message is this: *even if what is more elite in the Lewisian sense may in some way be metaphysically privileged, it is not relevantly so as far as normativity or aesthetic evaluation is concerned.* (Eklund, 2017: 30; italics in original)

While Eklund does not focus on metaepistemological questions, the general take-home message applies here too: Even if some knowledge-like concepts are metaphysically privileged, it is an open question whether they are also epistemically privileged. It is simply epistemologically irrelevant whether certain knowledge-like concepts allow us to draw distinctions that resemble those that can be drawn in the language of fundamental physics. And while there are other conceptions of joint-carvingness, the same problem arises in relation to them too: Since those conceptions are conceptions of a kind of metaphysical privilege, it is hard to see why this would by itself ensure any type of epistemic privilege (for further discussion, see Eklund, 2017: 30–31).<sup>36</sup>

It might help to note that this point goes both ways, in that other forms of privilege do not by themselves ensure any type of metaphysical privilege either. For example, there could be strong moral reasons to theorize in terms of GRUE rather than GREEN—perhaps an evil demon threatens to cause great harm if we do not do so. While this would make it morally important to use those concepts, it would clearly say nothing about their metaphysical status.<sup>37</sup> Thinking that GRUE has become metaphysically joint-carving in those circumstances would be to conflate moral importance with metaphysical importance. And the problem with the metaphysical interpretation of the idea that some knowledge-like concepts are epistemically important is that it similarly conflates metaphysical importance with epistemological importance.

### *5.5 Clarke-Doane's Non-Cognitivism*

Justin Clarke-Doane (2020a; 2020b) also discusses the further question that normative pluralism seems to invite. In contrast to the metaphysical interpretation of the question just considered, Clarke-Doane favors a broadly non-cognitivist approach along the lines of

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<sup>36</sup> For similar reasons, it will not help to appeal to the idea (associated with, e.g., Williamson, 1995) that the concept of knowledge is 'more explanatory' than other concepts, like that of true belief. If the relevant notion of explanation is metaphysical, it is again beside the point. If it is epistemic, it raises the questions: What about alternative explanation-like concepts?

<sup>37</sup> For related points, see Simion (2018) (see also note 27 above).

Gibbard (2003). On Clarke-Doane's view, the further question in the practical case concerns what *to do*, rather than what one *ought* to do. Many authors do not clearly distinguish between the locutions 'what to do' and 'what one ought to do', and if we do not draw such a distinction, no progress can of course be made by focusing on one of them rather than the other. But what is distinctive of Clarke-Doane's approach is precisely that he thinks the question of what to do should be given a non-cognitivist interpretation while the question of what one ought to do need not. With regard to actions, Clarke-Doane's idea is that one answers the question of what to do by forming an intention (or at least some intention-like attitude) to perform a certain action, rather than by forming a belief about some matter of fact.<sup>38</sup> In the epistemological case, the corresponding view is that the 'further question' raised by epistemic pluralism is the non-cognitive question of *what to believe*, which one answers by forming an intention to believe something.<sup>39</sup>

While Clarke-Doane does not consider the case of skepticism, his reasoning suggests a view about what it means to say that a knowledge-like concept is 'important' in the sense currently at issue. On that view, the question of which concept that is most important is also

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<sup>38</sup> I make a similar suggestion in Risberg (forthcoming), according to which the central question in practical deliberation is the non-cognitive question of what to do, rather than the cognitive question of what one ought to do. I am not convinced that this view can be plausibly extended to the context of the meta-skeptical challenge, however, for reasons that I will get to in a moment.

<sup>39</sup> In his (2020a), Clarke-Doane apparently leaves open whether the question of what to do is answered by an intention or by a related attitude that is "between acting and intending" (2020a: 173). In that work, he does not say much about epistemic pluralism specifically, but apparently assumes that we need a unified view of the question raised by epistemic pluralism and the question raised by pluralism about practical normative concepts. That assumption is far from obvious, however—while it is plausible that intentions-to-act have an important role to play in practical cases (such as choice situations), it is harder to see how intentions-to-believe matter in the context of skepticism, and in epistemological contexts more generally. The fact that we sometimes use the label 'normativity' to describe what is going on in both the epistemic case and the practical case might not track anything of deep importance (cf. footnote 11).

In a different article, Clarke-Doane (2020b) claims explicitly that the question of what to believe is the further question that epistemic pluralism raises. However, he does not say anything about the attitude with which one answers or settles that question (and thus does not address the question of whether it is an intention or something else), and does not discuss the case of skepticism.

understood as a question of which intentions-to-believe to form: i.e., whether to form an intention to believe claims that we are in a position to know, or to form an intention to believe claims that we are in a position to know<sub>IND</sub>, or those that we are in a position to know<sub>C</sub>, etc.

The first thing to note about this proposal is that it seems difficult to motivate unless one assumes a strong form of doxastic voluntarism, according to which we can come to believe that  $p$  by forming an intention to believe that  $p$ . After all, if we have no such control, our answers to the question of what to believe—which, on the view just outlined, are intentions-to-believe—cannot directly influence what we actually believe. This would make it hard to see how question of what to believe could be the question “at the center of our epistemic lives”, as Clarke-Doane puts it (2020b: 256). Following Bernard Williams (1970), this kind of strong doxastic voluntarism has been rejected by most authors.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, even if one grants the truth of this kind of voluntarism, there is again a worry that Clarke-Doane’s suggestion conflates different forms of importance. For example, suppose that a demon threatens to cause great harm unless I have some belief that is intuitively entirely ungrounded, such as the belief that there is life on the moon. Given voluntarism, considerations of this kind should surely have an impact on how we answer the question of which intentions-to-believe we form. In particular, if the harm at issue is great enough, we should answer the question of whether to have that belief affirmatively, and thus form the intention to believe it. (Given the strong voluntarist view, moreover, this intention would then ensure that we actually believe that there is life on the moon.) However, skepticism about life on the moon does not in any way become less plausible in view of such considerations. Facts about the consequences of believing a certain claim may speak against believing it, or intending to believe it, but they do not speak against the plausibility of the claim *itself*.<sup>41</sup> And what this suggests is that the question of what to believe is not the

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<sup>40</sup> There are of course exceptions; for example, Reisner (2013) argues that a form of doxastic voluntarism is at least conceptually possible. Note also that what I say here is compatible with thinking that we can have some other form of control over our beliefs, such as what McCormick (2011) calls ‘guidance control’, or what Paul (2015) calls ‘doxastic self-control’.

<sup>41</sup> This is another instance of the so-called ‘wrong kind of reason problem’, or something like it (cf., e.g., Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2004).

epistemologically central question that Clarke-Doane takes it to be. In particular, the question of which knowledge-like concept that is most important cannot plausibly be understood as a non-cognitive question of which intentions-to-believe to form, since how we answer the latter question should plausibly at least sometimes depend on practical, recognizably non-epistemic considerations.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Because no interpretation of the idea that some knowledge-like concept is epistemically more important than others seems plausible, I conclude that it is unclear whether the meta-skeptical challenge can be met. I will end by briefly relating this discussion to other themes that have figured in the debate about skepticism.

One issue concerns ineffability, which is one of the central topics in Hirsch's work on radical skepticism (Hirsch 2018). Hirsch holds that although we cannot doubt external reality, we nonetheless have epistemic reason to do so. As mentioned above (sect. 4), Hirsch suggests that this leaves us subject to a "distinctive form of epistemic anxiety the object of which cannot possibly be faced or literalistically expressed" (2018: 3–4). Interestingly, the meta-skeptical challenge might also motivate one to posit ineffability in the face of skepticism, but for very different reasons: Perhaps what is ineffable is the idea that certain knowledge-like concepts are the epistemically most important ones. This idea is more similar to the ineffability idea considered by Eklund in relation to the normative 'further question' (2017: 23–27; cf. sect. 5.4 above). I do not mean to suggest that this idea is plausible; on the contrary, it faces serious problems (Eklund, 2017: 23–27; Clarke-Doane, 2020a: 172). But it is striking that several quite different considerations might lead one to think that skeptical problems raise ineffable questions. It would be interesting to know if they are related.

Another issue concerns the idea that skeptical worries in some sense 'cannot be answered'. A common way to understand this idea is that we cannot answer skeptical challenges on the 'skeptic's own terms', roughly in the sense that we cannot justify our beliefs on grounds that a skeptic accepts. However, the problems that I have discussed suggest an alternative interpretation: Even if we *could* justify our beliefs on grounds that a skeptic accepts,

there would still be room for a form of skepticism—for a meta-skeptic could still be skeptical about the significance of such a skepticism-unfriendly notion of justification.

Lastly, on a natural way to think about skeptical challenges, the idea that animates them is that we should question all our beliefs, including the ones that seem most certain to us. (For instance, this approach is famously associated with Descartes.) However, what both skeptics and anti-skeptics have in effect done is to focus mostly on a *subset* of those beliefs; e.g., that we have hands, that other minds exist, or that the world did not come into existence five seconds ago. Other epistemologically central beliefs have received less scrutiny—in particular, that if we can only establish that we *know*, or have *justification* or *reason to believe* (etc.), that we have hands, that other minds exist, or that the world did not come into existence five seconds ago, then all radical skeptical challenges to those beliefs can be dismissed. What I hope to have shown, however, is that these less-discussed beliefs are also susceptible to skeptical worries—albeit worries that differ in kind from the more familiar ones.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> I am particularly indebted to Justin Clarke-Doane and Matti Eklund, who have both significantly influenced my thinking about these issues. I am also grateful to Krister Bykvist, Erik Carlson, Daniel Fogal, Nils Franzén, Jens Johansson, Don Loeb, Victor Moberger, Carl Montan, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Andrew Reisner, and two anonymous reviewers for this journal, as well as participants at the Graduate Student Workshop at Columbia University, the ethics reading group at University of Vermont, the Higher Seminar in Practical Philosophy at Uppsala University, and the Swedish Congress of Philosophy in Umeå 2019. The work on this paper has been generously supported by Helge Ax:son Johnson’s Foundation, Hultengren’s Foundation, The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, The Salén Foundation, Sixten Gemzéus’ Foundation, Thun’s Grant Foundation, Värmland’s nation in Uppsala, and Grant 2020-01955 from the Swedish Research Council.

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