

## **Open Problems: The Debasing Demon**

### **Abstract**

Skepticism is both a historical and foundational problem in epistemology. Jonathan Schaffer (2010) has provided a new expression of its threat. The Debasing Demon appears to generate a novel form of radical doubt, one that has gained prominence in recent debates. Instead of targeting the connection between belief and truth, it undercuts the link between belief and evidence (or reasons). This contribution presents the Debasing Demon Problem, analyzing its reach. It will provide an account for explaining how its threat is raised, explore its relationship to classical varieties of skepticism, and assess some of the main objections against it. It will be argued that Schaffer's Demon institutes a consistent epistemic threat, one that might represent the main variety of skepticism to be tackled in epistemology. Some consequences of this analysis are then presented concerning how to face this open problem.

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#### **1. Introduction**

Skepticism constitutes one of epistemology's central traditional problems. Its presence throughout history and the number of attempted refutations of it attest to its importance. This relevance can be reasonably ascribed to the consequences of the threat it establishes. If skepticism were correct, we'd lack ordinary justified beliefs and knowledge, contradicting our common-sense presumption that we do possess them. Yet, skepticism has notoriously been difficult to tackle and resist. Epistemology is littered with the remains of attempted refutations, dissolutions, and deflations of skeptical arguments. None of these have commanded consensus or agreement on effectively defusing the skeptical threat.

Furthermore, skepticism does not constitute a monolith. Historically, its attack against human knowledge has assumed several different guises. From the epoch of Hellenism, Pyrrhonian skepticism targeted the possibility of justified belief, relying on the ten Aenesidemian modes and the five Agrippan tropes. These constitute argumentative tactics purporting to show how any claim to justification is ultimately impossible, circular, or arbitrary, leading to suspension of belief and abandonment of inquiry. Cartesian skepticism is predicated on different methodological aims. By formulating possible scenarios of deception and error—such as dreaming or the evil demon—that have not thus far been ruled out as not occurring, it presses us to find stable or certain epistemic foundations. Not being able to show how such scenarios do not obtain, Cartesian skepticism ends up undermining our purported basic sources of knowledge and justification.

The general idea is that if it is left unsolved, skepticism threatens ordinary human knowledge. The availability of possible, pervasive error, or the impossibility of vindicating the rational standing of

our epistemic beliefs, we lose knowledge. The menace has left its mark on analytic epistemology, being the driver of numerous positive proposals.

It is, therefore, of substantial relevance that a seemingly new breed of epistemological skepticism has reared its head in contemporary debates, one that does not tread into the same kind of error-scenarios that traditional skepticism upholds. This is the *Debasing Demon* problem, due to Jonathan Schaffer (2010). In this article, I will overview the problem, showcasing to which degree it constitutes a novel kind of epistemological doubt and assessing whether it establishes a sound threat. To achieve this aim, I will provide a particular interpretation of the problem, one that connects it to basic epistemic principles we ought to adopt, and showing how it resists objections raised in the contemporary debate. Doing so will help shedding light on some crucial, but neglected aspects of skepticism.

## 2. The Debasing Demon

In this section, I'll present Schaffer's initial formulation and draw a preliminary assessment of the Debasing Demon's threat. This will be refined in the next sections by an engagement with a broader epistemological perspective.

Schaffer's Debasing Demon represents a novel radical skeptical problem that is seemingly different from the most traditional varieties. It undercuts knowledge while allowing us to retain true beliefs. Its reach is also wider than Cartesian doubt. It leaves no residue of knowledge, even of the minimal kind that skepticism usually allowed, like the Cogito. It also defeats *a priori* knowledge (2010, 228–9), and any retreat to the world of inner appearances (ibid, 230). Radical skepticism wouldn't deny such knowledge,<sup>1</sup> but the Debasing Demon nevertheless robs these states of whatever epistemic merit they might possess. Following Tim Williamson (2000, 93–4), Schaffer describes Debasing skepticism as engendering *cognitive homelessness* (2010, 231). It attacks whatever safe epistemic haven is available to the subject.

How can such a far-reaching doubt be established? The deceiving, or Cartesian, demon attacked knowledge by arguing that our beliefs could always be false. Debasing skepticism targets instead the connection between *belief* and *evidence*. To know, it is not enough that our beliefs be true. They must also be in virtue of some proper evidence. This is the *basing* requirement for knowledge. Given that knowledge requires basing beliefs on *appropriate evidence*, there is the possibility that our beliefs are held on an *improper basis*.<sup>2</sup> This means that it's also possible that our beliefs might have an improper basis while it seems to us that their basis is instead *proper*:

[...] the debasing demon might force me into believing that I have hands based on a blind guess or mere wishful thinking, while leaving me as if I had come to this belief on the basis of visual evidence (Schaffer 2010, 231)<sup>3</sup>

Is this scenario enough to engender radical skepticism as Schaffer envisions? When I see a red table and believe 'here is a red table', how can I be wrong about the basis on which I formed the belief? I

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<sup>1</sup> Cartesian skepticism is compatible with prima facie justification about internal states (Reynolds 2012, 271).

<sup>2</sup> This is not the same as saying *improperly based*, meaning that the belief is based on a good reason but in an erroneous or fallacious way that makes it unable to be an instance of knowledge. This issue only adverts to the phenomenon of human fallibility.

<sup>3</sup> For similar expressions of this possibility in the literature cf. Crispin Wright's *maundering* demon (1991, 106), and Descartes' brief argument about *defective nature* in the Third Meditation (cf. Beebe 2010, 458).

might be deceived by evidence into thinking the table is red when, in fact, it's not, but I can't be mistaken about *that* evidence being the basis of my belief. Schaffer contests this idea. Ruling out this possibility requires having *infallible access* to our internal states, which, for Schaffer, is implausible. Cartesian or internalist philosophers would surely disagree with this assessment. However, some intuitive support for Schaffer's contention can be marshaled. Contemporary epistemology has generally accepted Williamson's arguments (2000, 91) that no non-trivial internal states are epistemically transparent or luminous to the subject.<sup>4</sup> Without discussing such arguments in more detail, additional support can be drawn from more mundane sources. Studies on implicit bias have vindicated the idea that privileged, infallible internal access is a myth. Most importantly, pervasive and persistent implicit biases function precisely by misleading us concerning the basis on which we formed our beliefs, manifesting the kind of Debasing possibility Schaffer envisions.<sup>5</sup>

The endpoint is that Debasing skepticism institutes a radical skeptical problem with a broader reach than the traditional Cartesian variety (Schaffer 2010, 33). Even internal states, or the cogito, are undercut because they can be *debased*. They do not constitute valid<sup>6</sup> pieces of evidence anymore. By targeting beliefs the Cartesian demon could not deceive us about, Schaffer's Demon goes beyond the mere problem of whether our beliefs are true.<sup>7</sup> Having properly based beliefs, a crucial element of human knowledge is revealed as the weak underbelly of any knowledge claim.

Debasing skepticism goes beyond Cartesian doubt. However, it also provides an intuitive source of support for traditional skeptical arguments, such as:

- I) If I know there is a hand [KH], then I know I'm not dreaming [K→SK]
- II) I do not know I'm not dreaming [¬K→SK]
- III) I don't know that there is a hand [¬KH]

The possibility that the actual grounds of our beliefs might result from mere happenstance or completely flawed methods, faculties, or logic is essential in explaining how the above argument works. Cartesian skepticism exploits the fact that our beliefs might be wrong but cannot simply stop at that realization. This would only advert to our human fallibility, not to the conclusion that we do not possess knowledge. The skeptical insight is that an argument like the one above can be constructed to defeat all particular instances of knowledge. Premise I expresses the principle of knowledge closure, which is fairly counterintuitive to deny. Premise II is where the skeptical lever gets in. The skeptical scenario is incompatible with knowledge. By not knowing that it does not obtain, we are robbed of ordinary instances of knowledge.

How can this premise be defended is where much of epistemological discussion focuses on. Common defenses of it endorse the idea that real and skeptical experiences are subjectively

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<sup>4</sup> The so-called *anti-luminosity argument*. Some have noticed its nearness to actual skeptical reasoning (Wong 2008, Dodd 2007). Meeker & Poston (2010, 227-30) view it as an updated version of Hume's argument against reflective certainty. James Beebe (2010) views it as a skeptical argument from subjective indistinguishability.

<sup>5</sup> For an explicit connection between biases and skepticism cf. Saul 2013, Pasnau 2022, and Hannon 2021.

<sup>6</sup> In the epistemology of logic, validity signals the instantiation a valid logical schema. The terms 'valid' and 'validity' as used in this paper when referring to evidence or reasons are instead meant as a short-hand for expressing when a piece of evidence E for P, or reason R for P, is in fact evidence or reasons in favor of P.

<sup>7</sup> As Janvid (2024, 34) observes, the role of truth in the debasing demon is retained mainly in the idea that justification *aims* at truth, and the debasing possibility undercuts fulfilling *that* aim even if, ultimately, the belief is true.

indistinguishable (Beebe 2010, 467) or, similarly, that the evidence available in both cases is the same. However, these are weighty epistemological—even metaphysical—theses, that the epistemologist could reject, and that the skeptic would be at pains to defend.<sup>8</sup> This is where Debasing skepticism has the upper hand. The possibility that our beliefs might be debased is the possibility that each single one of our beliefs lacks the epistemic support required for knowledge. A debased belief that *p* is a belief grounded on a piece of evidence that is not a reason to believe *p*. Knowing that *p* in absence of reasons for *p* seems contradictory, unless we adopt the highly revisionary position that knowledge is entirely unrelated to reasons or evidence.<sup>9</sup> In virtue of this lack of reasons for belief, we do not know the denial of the skeptical hypothesis, allowing the skeptical argument to succeed. Interestingly, Debasing skepticism suggests here a crucial nearness to Pyrrhonian doubt, in particular its expression through the Agrippan Trilemma. Its tropes precisely exploit the question of what, if anything, can rationally ground and ultimately justify our epistemic beliefs, albeit via different argumentative strategies. We'll see more of this nearness in section three.

A possible, *prima facie* intuitive answer to the Debasing Demon might maintain that targeting the *basing* relation is not enough for skepticism to be as general as required. Epistemologists distinguish between two types of justification, doxastic and propositional justification. The former can be expressed as:

**Doxastic Justification:** S's belief that *p* is doxastically justified if S has good reasons available to believe that *p* and bases the belief on those reasons.

Schaffer's Demon quite clearly attacks the second clause of this definition. Even if one has available good reasons to believe, the Demon might always intervene and make them form the belief on a different, flawed reason instead.

However, this is compatible with good reasons being nevertheless *available* to the subject. It would simply mean that the subject cannot form a belief based on such good reasons. This means that *propositional justification* would remain unscathed.

**Propositional Justification:** The proposition *p* for S is propositionally justified when S possesses a good reason to believe *p*.<sup>10</sup>

If I see a red table, I possess a reason to believe that the table is red, even if I don't actually form the belief. Debasing Skepticism, by messing up the connection between our beliefs and the good reasons we have for them, would fail to undermine propositional justification. If the epistemologist could walk away with it, radical skepticism's reach would be strongly diminished.

However, this objection misunderstands the kind of threat that Debasing raises. Focusing on the basing relation makes it look like the issue is simply one of not having a correct connection between

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Marušić 2016 and Leite 2019 for an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of *symmetry* arguments.

<sup>9</sup> This is a possible route to answer this kind of skepticism, one that would suit best externalist, naturalist positions. However, by appealing to such a conception of knowledge, we would be trapped into one of the horns of Michael Williams' (1996, 22) *Epistemologist Dilemma*: to refute skepticism, we had to extensively revise the ordinary concept of knowledge, proving in the process the skeptic's attack on ordinary knowledge as valid.

<sup>10</sup> See Turri 2010, 313; Wedgwood 2022, 219; De Toffoli 2022; Silva and Oliveira 2024. It is generally understood that doxastic justification is just propositional justification plus proper basing, but this idea has been recently challenged, see Turri 2010, Melis 2018, De Toffoli 2022. Some externalists (Kornblith 2017) argue that doxastic justification is the only epistemically relevant kind of justificatory relation.

belief and its basis, as if we made a mistake or we were rationally obstructed from believing that p while nevertheless still possessing good reasons for p. But the action of the Debasing Demon makes it so that there can't be *anything* that could function as a good reason to the subject for having the belief. If I see an existing red table and the Demon is debasing me, any belief I could form about the table would not have as its basis the experience or fact of a red table being there. The problem is then that, given debasing, how can seeing the red table ever be something like a *reason available to me for believing* that the table is red? Even if I see the red table, this experience is systematically impeded from being a reason to believe that 'there is a red table'. Thus, in what sense is that experience still be something that affords me with a reason to believe?<sup>11</sup>

Holding that it nevertheless does afford us with reasons to believe, would mean upholding a conception of propositional justification—sometimes labeled *Objective Propositional Justification*—according to which something can be a reason to believe that p in complete independence of whether the subject is even capable of entertaining it as a reason to believe p. Reasons would hence not need to be possessed or available to the subject to grant them propositional justification. To recognize how this is a quite implausible conception of epistemic justification, it should suffice to mention that it would theoretically allow something to be a reason to believe even if placed completely beyond the reach of human subjects. Its mere existence would make us all propositionally justified with regard to the proposition it supports no matter what. Even if this kind of propositional justification is spared from the jaws of Debasing skepticism, it is questionable whether it is something that has anything to do with human knowledge and normativity.<sup>12</sup>

The way propositional justification falls under the threat of Debasing skepticism ought to make us appreciate how far its reaches extend. Propositions whose justification is usually conceived as being a priori—such as mathematical or logical propositions—can perhaps be justifiedly believed even on defective or improper grounds. However, the effect of the Debasing Demon is to make any belief *groundless*, having no good reason supporting it. The a priori, indefeasible status such propositions enjoy won't shield them from their not ever becoming available reasons for belief to the subject.<sup>13</sup> This is a remarkable achievement of Debasing skepticism over more classical varieties.<sup>14</sup> In standard debates and analyses of skepticism, its effect on a priori knowledge and justification is often neglected. It is rarely debated whether radical skepticism can undermine knowledge of logical

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<sup>11</sup> Ballantyne & Evans (2013) acknowledge that the debasing demon impedes any reason R from becoming a reason to believe for S. Mikael Janvid (2024, 32) argues that the debasing demon targets only doxastic justification, which is enough to impede knowledge because the basing relation is required for knowledge. However, this would mean that a reason R *to form that belief* would still be available to S. It remains unclear how, under the spell of the debasing demon, that reason R would be available to S for correctly forming a belief based on it. The demon prevents S from forming any belief based on any proper R; therefore, R does not seem to be available to S in the way propositional justification envisions.

<sup>12</sup> For an endorsement of Objective Propositional Justification cf. Smithies 2015. For a criticism of it concerning the realms where its adoption might be more widespread see De Toffoli forthcoming, § 2.2.1.

<sup>13</sup> A similar expression of this kind of threat against *a priori* can be found in James Beebe's *bumbling demon* (2010, 456-7; 2011, 590). The bumbling demon differs from debasing in its being a rather unskilled malicious agent, making subjects believe on a proper basis by pure chance. As in the debasing case, this still voids justification due to luck. Beebe did not mention Schaffer's demon in his initial works on the bumbling demon (2010, 2011), but he does in his (2015) reply to Vahid's criticism (2013) against both varieties of a priori skepticism.

<sup>14</sup> Cartesian dreaming skepticism could not impinge the truth of mathematical and geometrical propositions. The subsequent evil omnipotent deceiver ruled out such propositions as *false*. The Debasing demon forbids them from ever constituting valid reasons for belief, even if they are true (cf. Kraft 2015, 271; Stroud 1984, 25-7). The closest one finds in Descartes' *Meditation* to the Debasing threat is the often neglected – because only briefly mentioned – argument from *defective nature*.

principles, at least in epistemology.<sup>15</sup> However, Schaffer's Demon allows for the topic of a priori knowledge to fully re-enter skeptical considerations, allowing for a more comprehensive and systematic threat.

### 3. Debasing, Ignorance, and Underdetermination

Notwithstanding the increased reach of the Debasing threat over more mundane forms of radical skepticism, it might be maintained that a scenario such as the one described by Schaffer is sufficiently bizarre not to merit a serious engagement. Even if Descartes' own formulation of radical skepticism appealed to an omnipotent evil deceiver, scenarios such as dreaming, or the more contemporary rendition of the brain-in-a-vat rest on more solid, even if unlikely, grounds. However, Cartesian skepticism itself would be a relatively weak threat if it relied entirely on the possibility of such scenarios being actual. What constitutes its main intuitive pull is instead the idea that underlies such scenarios. Exploiting the idea that in order to know  $p$ ,  $p$  must be true, Cartesian scenarios embody the idea that our beliefs might be systematically mistaken.<sup>16</sup> Undetected and uneliminated possibilities of error advert to the fact that experiences do not wear truth on their sleeves. Conjoined by the relatively intuitive principle of epistemic closure, uneliminated error-possibilities deny us knowledge of ordinary propositions.

Is it possible for the Debasing Demon to be in fact just a convenient way of presenting an underlying epistemological problem, one that exploits some epistemic principle that epistemologists themselves would want to endorse? This would allow the Debasing threat not to stake all its reasoning on the actual existence of a tricky demon. In this section, I will argue that the answer to this question is positive.

There are two main insights that can be investigated to reach this verdict. The first concerns the character of Debasing skepticism. While Cartesian radical doubt treads on uneliminated error-possibilities, Debasing focuses instead on the fact that our beliefs might still be true, and yet they might be based on reasons that have nothing to do with their truth. Debasing shows that the subject is in a state of ignorance concerning her general epistemic standing. She is not in the position of telling whether the actual grounds of her beliefs are the epistemically valid ones. In fact, she seems to be barred from even understanding what such grounds are. The second idea is that, even for Cartesian radical skepticism, halting to error considerations might not be enough. Imagine a human subject with a body unknowingly hooked up to a machine that replicates everything that happens in the real world around her. Were the subject to believe 'I have hands' due to her envatted experiences, the belief would technically be true. She does have hands, even if she's connected to the machine. However, this belief intuitively does not amount to knowledge, in the same way dreaming that one has hands gives no relevant epistemic support to the corresponding belief. In

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<sup>15</sup> The common idea is that the justification pertaining to ordinary logical and epistemic principles is preserved in Cartesian skeptical arguments because the skeptic must play the same normative game as the epistemologist. A long-standing thread in attempted refutations of skepticism relies on the idea that skepticism undermines itself by virtue of its adherence to logical/epistemic principles (cf. Lai 2019; Dixon 2022). However, it can be argued that this concession to the epistemologist can be merely provisional or *parasitic*, in the sense of accepting the justified status of logical principles to then undo their justification via skeptical arguments, kicking away the ladder.

<sup>16</sup> Also called the *Falsity Model* of skepticism, cf. Winters 1981, 32-3.

neither case the belief being true suffices for possessing knowledge.<sup>17</sup> This suggests that for radical skepticism in general, there must be more to it than simple error. Perhaps, by focusing on the rational support that beliefs enjoy, Debasing skepticism is onto the real culprit of the skeptical problem.

But how can skepticism threaten ordinary knowledge if error-possibilities are not treated as essential to it? We mentioned that Debasing shows how the subject is cognitively homeless. More specifically, she is ignorant concerning her epistemic standing. She has no grounds to orient herself concerning which beliefs are rational and which aren't. Tellingly, the traditional Cartesian (closure-based) argument has often been called an *Argument from Ignorance*.<sup>18</sup> The argument's minor premise is also often called the 'ignorance' premise, as it expresses the subject's not knowing the denial of skepticism.

What does ignorance mean here? Ignorance means that our beliefs might fall short of the knowledge mark all at once (Kraft 2013, 60; Murphy 2013, 272), even if some are true. Ignorance severs the epistemic validity of any connection between the belief and its basis. This explains how skepticism can countenance false beliefs, sheds light on how the existence of a priori or necessary truth does not dispel the skeptical threat, and why skepticism is not trivially fallibilism.<sup>19</sup> If Debasing exploits such a possibility, this will show how Cartesian skepticism is essentially a less general variety of it, unduly focusing on false beliefs.

However, if skepticism is just a problem of ignorance, this would mean that it relies on a condition of this sort:

**IC:** S knows p only if there are no uneliminated ignorance possibilities (Kraft 2013, 65)

The clear problem is that such a principle is highly problematic. If IC is true, then S knows p only if ignorance is defeated, meaning that the subject *has to know this* as the defeat of ignorance is just knowledge. This is a highly idealized, demanding, and intellectual conception of knowledge. Relying on it would undermine the skeptical threat. It would be easy to defuse it by simply rejecting the very conception underneath it.

Can Debasing skepticism rely on a sounder principle? We observed that ignorance is when all our beliefs fall short of knowledge. That is because, by voiding the epistemically valid connection between evidence and belief, our beliefs lack *epistemic merit*. Evidence available in a dream or a simulation is, by definition, not evidence capable of supporting valid beliefs about the world. The same holds for Debasing scenarios, as the evidence on which beliefs are actually grounded on has been provided by the Demon. The epistemically meritorious connection with valid evidence or reasons is lacking.<sup>20</sup> Attributing knowledge or justification on such a defective basis would be arbitrary, even if the belief is true.

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<sup>17</sup> Conversely, if one were to step in a simulated reality, this wouldn't automatically make her previous beliefs about the world unjustified (Murphy 2013, 274). In fact, some skeptical scenarios *require* some beliefs to be true to be viable (Kraft 2013, 64-5; 2015, 271-2; Murphy 2013, 276).

<sup>18</sup> This requires the skeptical conditional to be expressed through its contrapositive form:  $\neg K \rightarrow \neg SK \rightarrow \neg KH$ . See on this Kraft 2012, 51; De Rose 1995, 1.

<sup>19</sup> See Kraft 2012; 2013, 69-71; 2015, 269-71.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Winters 1981, 35-6.

Is there an epistemic principle that captures the idea that justification is missing when a belief's rational or evidential basis lacks epistemic merit? There is. It's the underdetermination principle:

**UP:** If  $q$  is a competitor to  $p$ , then one can know  $p$  only if one can non-arbitrarily reject  $q$ , i.e., only if it has more epistemic merit than  $q$  (Vogel 2004, 427)<sup>21</sup>

Underdetermination expresses the idea that for a belief to possess epistemic merit and constitute knowledge, there must be some actually valid, non-arbitrary ground to back it up.<sup>22</sup> Rejecting UP means that it would be possible for  $S$  to know that  $p$  even when the evidence available to her is quite weak, or when defeaters are present. Rejecting UP would not be an advisable path for the non-skeptic. It would easily open the doors to dogmatic claims, or to a too-easy rejection of plausible alternatives (Tana 2022, 93).<sup>23</sup> Additionally, contemporary research has acknowledged the importance of underdetermination in motivating the minor premise  $\neg K \neg SK$  of the traditional skeptical argument.<sup>24</sup>

However, the UP formulation does not capture what we are looking for. By mentioning competitors, it still ties epistemic merit to the possibility of ruling out alternatives. This is problematic for Debasing skepticism, because it would ultimately mean again making a point about erring between possible choices. Instead, as mentioned when making the point about propositional justification, the reach of Debasing skepticism lies in questioning whether any ground can be a good reason for belief. Fortunately, Duncan Pritchard has argued that the skeptical insight raised by underdetermination expresses a *Rational Ground Principle*:

**RGP:** If  $S$  has a rationally grounded belief that  $P$ , then  $S$  lacks a rational basis for believing not- $p$  (Pritchard 2015, 49).

When  $S$  possesses adequate support for her belief, it means that there are good reasons to have that belief. When such support is lacking, it becomes arbitrary to hold the belief, as it lacks epistemic merit. This is what Debasing skepticism exploits to undercut knowledge. Debasing skepticism raises the question of whether our beliefs are based on an epistemically proper ground or reason. The effect of the Debasing Demon is to undercut any possible reason for belief as a good reason for belief. But the question is general, it need not to be tied to an actual demon doing this meddling. The problem concerns what makes, if anything, the support our beliefs enjoy epistemically rational and valid. Answering the Debasing challenge requires vindicating that our beliefs do enjoy such merit in virtue of being grounded on actual good reasons.

Explaining the cognitive homelessness that Debasing skepticism exploits in terms of underdetermination seems therefore a warranted choice.<sup>25</sup> It provides an account for how Debasing skepticism is able to attack the connection between reasons and beliefs, explaining how it manages to possess a farther reach than radical skepticism ordinarily conceived. In fact, it shows how

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<sup>21</sup> J. J. Cunningham also appeals to underdetermination to interpret the Debasing Demon, among other principles (2021, 815). For a criticism of the other principles Cunningham employs, see Janvid 2024, 34-7. Janvid also employs underdetermination to defend the soundness of debasing skepticism.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Vogel 2004, 439; Pritchard 2005, 119; Tana 2024, 261.

<sup>23</sup> The main accusation against it is that it involves infallibilism (Brueckner 2005; Briesen 2010; Dodd 2012). See Tana 2024 and Savino 2023 for arguments against such objection.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Brueckner 1994. See Tana 2022 for a general overview of the debate and an argument for the skeptical pre-eminence of underdetermination over alternative epistemic principles.

<sup>25</sup> See Tana 2024, 257-260 for a more detailed argument.

Cartesian skepticism itself is predicated on the risk of not having valid, non-arbitrary rational grounds. A further interesting consequence also appears. By framing Debasing skepticism, and with it the classical Cartesian variety, through the lenses of underdetermination, radical skepticism is revealed to possess a common root with Pyrrhonism. The inquiry that leads to the Agrippan modes is motivated by a question of what constitutes the epistemic validity and merit of a chosen criterion for knowledge. The provided explanation of Debasing in terms of underdetermination suggests an understanding of skepticism as a single unified problem.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Objections

Understanding Debasing skepticism through the lenses of underdetermination appears to be a live option in current debates (Cunningham 2021; Janvid 2024). Furthermore, the main alternative mechanism proposed—relying on the Ignorance Condition—does not seem to be as intuitive. However, objections have been raised against Debasing skepticism, both concerning its actual skeptical threat and its consistency. This section will argue that the underdetermination account we provided is able to withstand such attacks.

There are generally two ways of facing a skeptical threat. An *overriding* response aims to show that we do know, against what the skeptic maintains. Skeptical arguments are valid, but they can be refuted. An *undercutting* strategy aims to show instead that the problem is illusory, the product of faulty theory and dubious commitments.<sup>27</sup>

Overriding strategies against Debasing Skepticism have been few. The main one is due to Earl Conee. He agrees with Schaffer that any belief can be debased (2015, 1). For him, Debasing occurs when the subject is unaware of it taking place. However, if Debasing has a skeptical effect if and only if it goes undetected by the subject, this means that if the subject had at her disposal a piece of internal evidence ruling this possibility out, then Schaffer's Demon would be defeated (*ibid*, 3).

Conee thinks we have this evidence. Even if Debasing skepticism attacks the connection between justification and belief, in his eyes “[this] would leave our evidence deriving from conscious states exactly as it is” (*ibid*, 5). It would still be evidence that largely indicates how the world is, as debasing would be, at most, a ‘localized causal oddity.’ Therefore, the general possibility of debasing does not “cast any rational doubt on our actual knowledge”. We still have evidence on which we can rely even when debased, from memory, perception, or inferences to the best explanation supporting that our apparent knowledge is properly based (*ibid*, 7).

It is fairly puzzling to maintain that debasing is a genuine possibility and that it is nevertheless a local oddity that leaves us with a plethora of non-debated evidence at our disposal. From the point of view of the subject, to maintain that one can only be locally debased would require a justified belief concerning which pieces of evidence or reasons are not debased. How can this belief be spared from debasing is left unaddressed. However, Conee's argument has deeper issues. He contends that debasing only undermines the link between justification and belief, leaving internal evidence the same. Debasing would only block us from forming a belief based on good evidence we possess. As section two highlighted this is a mischaracterization of debasing skepticism. The

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<sup>26</sup> On underdetermination embodying an essentially Pyrrhonian insight, cf. Tana 2022, 95-6.

<sup>27</sup> This distinction is borrowed from Pritchard 2015, 16-7. Janvid (2024, 35) identifies the distinction as being between refutations and dialectical arguments.

problem does not concern mere rational obstruction to correctly form a belief. It targets the very capacity of a piece of evidence to be a good reason for belief.<sup>28</sup> To argue that some evidence is capable of being a reason for belief, the underdetermination problem must be already resolved. Conee's answer either rejects underdetermination as a general epistemic principle, or simply amounts to a dismissal of Debasing skepticism.

The undercutting route against Debasing has been the most traveled one. The first objection here considered is due to Nathan Ballantyne and Ian Evans (2013). They argue that the skeptic must endorse some principle linking the debasing possibility to the impossibility of propositional justification. Any such principle would, however, entail denying the following:

**Transparency:** the question *whether one is justified to believe p* is transparent to the question *whether p*. One's answer to the latter always determines one's answer to the former (2013, 555)

Ballantyne and Evans argue that there could not be a circumstance where the answers to these questions could come apart. If one discovers that *p* is true, then one is justified to believe *p*. But this means that if one discovers that *p* is true, being debased makes no difference to whether one is justified to believe *p* either. Discovering whether one is debased *doesn't change one's answer to whether p*. Neither being debased or not being debased actually changes the fact that *p* is true, so neither should change whether one should believe *p*. Debasing is irrelevant to simple, first-order beliefs that *p* because it does not attack the link between belief and truth. This means that debasing, by not having an effect on whether *p*, also has no effect on whether one should believe *p*. Hence, it does not undercut justification that *p* (ibid, 556).

Ballantyne & Evans' objection seems predicated on the idea that justification is factive, by saying that determining whether *p* also settles whether one is justified in believing that *p*. Given that this is a contentious thesis, their objection can be charitably understood as pertaining to the subject's point of view: when the subject knows that *p*, hence she ascertains *whether p*, then *S* is justified in believing that *p*. While this might be a way to uphold Transparency in some cases, it is a trivial conclusion. It is obvious that if *S* knows *p*, then, on reflection, *S* can be justified in believing that *p*. But the problem is that it is then also true by definition that, if *S* knows that *p*, then Debasing does not affect whether *S* should believe *p*. After all, she already knows *p* in virtue of some good reasons for *p*; this knowledge had to be gained by avoiding Debasing somehow.

However, if we ask whether *S* is justified in believing that *p* *before* granting her knowledge that *p*, then the possibility of Debasing is obviously relevant to whether *S* should believe *p*. If it is established that *S* *knows* that *p*, this means that Debasing is absent, and with it the problem of rational underdetermination. However, the Debasing problem yields its threat precisely *before* such knowledge is obtained by *S*, in virtue of the underdetermination requirement on rationally grounded belief. Their strategy, in essence, begs the question against Debasing by misplacing where it strikes.

Finally, the main undercutting objection against Debasing is the simplest and most common of the lot—offered by Brueckner (2012), Vahid (2013), and Murphy (2013) in various guises. It concerns precisely the ignorance aspect that we analyzed in the previous section. It argues that the kind of

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<sup>28</sup> The piece of evidence is revealed as rationally insular (Pritchard 2015, 55) or *neutral*. See also Cunningham 2021, 830. For an application of this idea to other anti-skeptical strategies see Tana 2024, 264-8.

ignorance or cognitive homelessness that Schaffer's original formulation endorsed is predicated on a highly contentious epistemic thesis. Schaffer maintained that knowing that *p* implies that the belief that *p* is not debased. For this to bear a skeptical consequence one must also endorse that if *S* knows that *p*, then *S* can know that her belief that *p* is properly based. It is by not fulfilling the consequent of this conditional that the conclusion *S* does not know that *p* is reached. However, the conditional equates to the dreaded KK-thesis: if *S* knows *p*, then *S* must at least be in the position of knowing that *S* knows *p*. This is often considered a highly implausible principle to assume. It leads to an overly-intellectualized and counterintuitive picture of knowledge. Positions endorsing it are routinely rejected on this exact point.<sup>29</sup>

Schaffer himself recognized in a footnote (2010, 234) that Debasing could rely on something akin to the KK-thesis. He held that this might not be that implausible after all, and others (Kraft 2015, 284–8; Beebe 2015, 323) have followed Schaffer on this score.<sup>30</sup> This route does not seem too promising. Section three in this paper grants us a better rejoinder to the objection. By interpreting ignorance via underdetermination, and not via Ignorance conditions that functionally match the KK-thesis, this crucial element of Debasing was not motivated via contentious epistemic principles.

Perhaps it could be contested that the requirement expressed by underdetermination for knowledge—that our beliefs possess epistemic merit via rational grounding—is nothing else than a KK-thesis in disguise. However, upholding this claim entails defending the idea that *every* request of establishing the correctness of what grounds our beliefs ought to be discarded because implausible. The consequence of this answer is one of divorcing entirely knowledge from evaluative or normative dimensions. This is a highly revisionary strategy. If the very idea that for our beliefs to amount to knowledge, our beliefs need to be *properly based* is illicit, it is unclear how the concept of justification can be retained as significant. This strategy might even find the skeptic in agreement.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, it is questionable whether UP and KK are the same. Underdetermination does not necessarily require higher-order epistemic states to confirm every instance of knowledge. What underdetermination requires is that our beliefs be responsive to good, non-arbitrary reasons to be justified. Believing without such responsiveness amounts to believing arbitrarily. Rejecting UP because it might seem too close to KK ends up making the very idea of responsiveness to reasons mysterious, taking away from us the very concept of beliefs having epistemic merit because based on good reasons. But this is what the skeptic was arguing for all along, i.e., that our beliefs amount to nothing else than arbitrary guesses. Decreeing that the requirement UP expresses is illicit closes the doors to a satisfactory answer to skeptical doubts in general.

## 5. Conclusion: Defending Rational Belief

In this contribution I presented Schaffer's Debasing Demon, detailing how it establishes a novel epistemological problem, and how it allows us to shed light on some more neglected aspects of radical skepticism. The analysis offered should be capable of supporting Debasing skepticism as

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<sup>29</sup> Generally, this objection possessed a strong externalist bent. Recent internalist proposals, such as *phenomenal conservatism*, have tended to accept this point as well. For a criticism of this approach vis-à-vis skepticism, see Reynolds 2012, 268.

<sup>30</sup> Cunningham (2021, 825-27) interprets Debasing without recourse to KK-theses.

<sup>31</sup> Again, making us fall into the revisionary horn of the *Epistemologist's Dilemma*. Breaking the relationship between knowledge and epistemic appraisal in such a way would find the skeptic in complete agreement (cf. Fogelin 1994, 54-8; 2000, 47).

a cogent open problem in contemporary epistemology, and perhaps as the variety of radical skepticism that should warrant most scrutiny.

Are there no possible ways out of Debasing? One of the objections against Debasing that we have not yet analyzed is due to Patrick Bondy and Adam Carter (2018). Their arguments focus on the idea that the Debasing Demon cannot be a threat on any viable conception of the basing relation. Bondy and Carter argue that if the basing relationship is conceived as a causal relation, then the Debasing Demon cannot work. The deviant causal chain created by the Demon makes it so that the belief cannot be causally sustained by the faulty reason the Demon swaps in for the valid reason. Hence, there cannot be a belief *actually based* on such a faulty basis, making the Debasing Demon is metaphysically impossible.

The underdetermination understanding we provided allows us to resist this objection. Now, for Debasing to arise, there isn't even the need for a Demon to swap a bad basis for a good one (cf. Janvid 2024, 39). The Debasing problem concerns the validity of *any* basis for our beliefs.

More interesting is Bondy and Carter's idea that the basing relation can also be understood as a doxastic relation:

**Doxastic Basing)** For S, p, reason R, S's belief that p is based on R if S believes that R is a good reason to believe p (Bondy & Carter 2018, 206; Bondy 2021, 330)

If the basing relation is established via a higher-order doxastic state that the subject possesses, how can the Debasing Demon wedge in to threaten what constitutes the ground's validity? The reason R being the valid *and actual* basis of the lower-order belief that p is established by the subject's higher-order belief that *that reason is the good ground for believing p*.

Bondy's answer has some issues. Targeting the basing relation does not address the fact that Debasing also targets propositional justification. The problem is broader than he conceives it to be. Secondly, such a strong, internalistic conception of proper basing—which we remind the reader is usually considered necessary for knowledge—might be even more problematic than the KK-principle.<sup>32</sup> Even if we concede it for the sake of argument, the already mentioned problem of implicit bias should give us pause in thinking that something like Bondy's proposal can work.<sup>33</sup>

However, an aspect of Bondy's picture is worth considering. His case against Debasing is also wedded to the idea that a certain *spectatorial* conception of epistemic justification constitutes the source of skeptical worries. On the spectatorial conception, justificatory reasons for belief are evaluated independently from justifiedly believing. Bondy instead suggests adopting the *Justificationist* conception, according to which facts about justification-makers and facts about justifiedly believing are not independent of one another (2018, 210).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Janvid (2024, 41) notes how this move presupposes infallible introspection. Bondy's general position is one of psychologism and doxastic voluntarism about reasons, which are not perspectives many deem as offering promising anti-skeptical grounds and that attract many opponents and detractors. See Bondy 2017 for a defense of the general position conceived as a stance on *the normative force* of reasons and not on their nature.

<sup>33</sup> For a reply to Bondy's strategy explicitly based on the problem of implicit bias cf. Janvid 2024, 45-8.

<sup>34</sup> This idea is taken from Leite 2004, and it is generally a core component of the so-called 'default-and-challenge' conception of epistemic justification.

The justificationist conception is of interest because it highlights an important aspect of the requirement for justification expressed by underdetermination. We have already mentioned that underdetermination ties justification to the possibility of our beliefs being *responsive* to reasons. Responsiveness to reasons can be understood—following Adam Leite— as being a matter of recognizing something as ‘telling in favor of the belief’, making the reason then available to the subject for epistemic deliberation (Leite 2008, 421). Treating something as a reason for belief means that S is committed to offering that reason as a defense or explanation for why one has that belief (ibid, 423). What is problematic in Debasing skepticism is the threat that our grounds for beliefs are, in fact, *no grounds at all*. A Justificationist perspective is meant to address how evidence and reasons become actual and non-arbitrary grounds for our beliefs.

The problem with Bondy’s proposal is the excessive intellectualization of rational basing. In Leite’s account, treating something as a valid reason for belief is instead *externalized*. Responsiveness to reasons is a specific form of epistemic agency, an activity carried out in the environment and towards *other subjects*. It is an *intersubjective endeavor*, a public practice of making and defending claims where a good reason to believe p can be recognized as such by others and defended when challenged.

This strategy can offer an answer to underdetermination and Debasing by explaining what is, that which gives our evidence and reasons for the epistemic credentials and the validity they need to be proper grounds for epistemic beliefs. Reasons, evidence, and the support they provide are not to be evaluated in complete independence from what we do with them and how we treat them as suited to our epistemic tasks in the open. The evaluation of reasons for belief is now an intersubjective matter. But in this way, the intelligibility of the Debasing Demon lapses. Debasing is revealed as targeting some ‘inner’ or ‘intrinsic’ character of epistemic reasons that would now be irrelevant to epistemic justification if it exists at all. What validly supports a belief is what can be publicly recognized to have this function. Propositional justification is *intersubjective*: a reason R is available for a human agent belonging to an epistemic community to form the corresponding belief that p, and there are no defeaters against R that are intersubjectively evident and subjectively undefeated (De Toffoli 2022, 258).

According to this view, the problem arguably evaporates. As Schaffer presented the problem, the Debasing Demon occurs when I form a belief based on some improper or bad grounds while being under the impression that I formed the belief for actually good reasons. However, now, what makes something a good or a bad ground for believing is not established in independence from my commitment concerning some piece of evidence as being a good reason for believing nor from my responsibility towards others in upholding this commitment. The very idea of having a mistaken reason for belief while being under the impression that it is a good reason for belief cannot be wedged in this justificatory picture. Furthermore, this picture does not require the highly-intellectualized, internalistic picture Bondy endorsed. Ultimately, Debasing, and skepticism in general, might be by-products of a spectatorial conception of reasons, evidence, and justification.

The above suggestion is merely meant to be a possibility to be pursued against the open problem of Debasing skepticism and the more general issue of underdetermination. Notwithstanding the resilient character of skepticism about rational belief, it might just offer the required resources to provide a satisfactory anti-skeptical answer.

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