

TRADING ONE KIND OF DOGMATISM FOR ANOTHER: COMMENTS ON WILLIAMS' CRITICISM OF AGRIPPAN SCEPTICISM

Armando Cíntora y Jorge Ornelas
Departamento de Filosofía, UAM-I
cintora1@prodigy.net.mx
jornelass@gmail.com

Abstract

M. Williams' analysis (1999, 2001 and 2004b) of the *Prior Grounding Conception* (PGC) of epistemic justification — a conception allegedly behind the Agrippan trilemma — is reviewed and it is contrasted with the *Default Challenge Conception* of justification (DChC) — the alternative conception of epistemic justification championed by Williams. It is argued that the epistemic default entitlements of the DChC are a euphemism for *epistemically* arbitrary stipulations, it is also argued that while the PGC might lead to sceptical paradoxes, the DChC leads to a paradoxical pancriticism, and that which of these two paradoxes to prefer will be a matter of taste or temperament. Finally it is argued that the DChC is neither an adequate description of our philosophical, nor, it seems, of our ordinary epistemic practice. It is then concluded that the PGC is the superior conception, even if it might lead to a Pyrrhonian attitude towards the absolute presuppositions of science. We conclude by openly arguing in favour a type of non-epistemic dogmatism with Pyrrhonian implications (some of these dogmas could be, for example, criteria of proper evidence, criteria of rational belief, criteria of rational

Recibido: 23-07-2012. Aceptado: 09-10-2012.

action, criteria for desirable goals, etc.). These consequences, however, don't have to be inimical to scientific research.

Keywords: Epistemic Justification; Agrippan Trilemma; Epistemic Dogmatism; Non-Epistemic Dogmatism; Scepticism.

Resumen

Se discute el análisis de M. Williams (1999, 2001 and 2004b) de la *Concepción de la Fundamentación Previa* de la justificación epistémica (CFP) —una concepción supuestamente detrás del trilema de Agripa— y se le contrasta con la *Concepción del Desafío por Defecto* (CDD) —la concepción alternativa de la justificación epistémica propugnada por Williams. Se argumenta que los privilegios epistémicos predeterminados de la CDD son un eufemismo para estipulaciones *epistémicamente* arbitrarias, asimismo se argumenta que mientras el CFP puede conducir a paradojas escépticas, la CDD conduce a un pancriticismo paradójico y que cuál de estas dos paradojas preferir es un asunto de gusto o temperamento. Finalmente se arguye que la CDD no es ni una adecuada descripción de nuestra práctica filosófica, ni tampoco de nuestra práctica epistémica cotidiana. Se concluye entonces que la CFP es la concepción superior, aun si pudiese conducir al escepticismo pirrónico. Concluimos argumentando abiertamente en favor de un tipo de dogmatismo no epistémico con implicaciones pirrónicas para las presuposiciones absolutas de la ciencia (algunos de los dogmas serían por ejemplo, criterios de evidencia adecuada, criterios de creencia racional, criterios de acción racional, criterios de metas deseables, etc.) Estas consecuencias, sin embargo, no tienen por qué ser incompatibles con la investigación científica.

Palabras clave: Justificación epistémica; Trilema de Agripa; Dogmatismo Epistémico; Dogmatismo No-epistémico; Escepticismo.

We check the story of Napoleon, but not whether all the reports about him are based on sense-deception, forgery and the like. For whenever we test anything, we are already presupposing something that is not tested . . .

(Wittgenstein, 1975, §163)

Introduction

In several places M. Williams¹ has characterized Agrippan scepticism (the scepticism about the possibility of justifying any beliefs²) as resting on the so called “Agrippan trilemma,” which consists of ancient argumentative strategies for inducing, if not a universal, at least a wide suspension of judgement about the possibility of justified belief. This trilemma aims to show to the dogmatist —he who claims knowledge of some proposition *p*— that once he is asked for a justification for his belief for the truth of *p* he cannot provide it, without falling into one of the following three unpalatable alternatives

1) *Regression*: the justification of *p* requires an antecedent justification *q*, *q* requires —in turn— an antecedent justification *r* and so on *ad infinitum*. Since we cannot know where justification starts we should, if rational,³ suspend judgment regarding *p*.

¹ Cf., Williams, 1992: §2.4, 1999a: ch. 1, §2, 2001: ch. 5 and 2004b: §1.

² Cf., Sextus Empiricus, *PH*: 1.164-9.

³ A justificationist conception of rationality is here at play, one that states that a belief is rational if and only if it is justified (via argument or experience), and by extension a rational subject would be rational *iff* she justifies her beliefs. This conception of rationality is however self defeating, since its criterion of rationality cannot itself be justified without begging the question, thus K. Popper (1945: 218) argued instead for a critical rationalism, one that, conscious of these difficulties, grants that it requires at least an unjustifiable presupposition (or dogma). Cf., Cíntora, A. 2005 (chapter 2) for a critical commentary on Popper’s theory of rationality.

2) *Stipulation*: it occurs when in order to avoid regression the dogmatist establishes some q as starting a justificatory chain for p , this while q lacks antecedent justification. This *manoeuvre* is *epistemically* arbitrary, and so we should if rational suspend judgment regarding the justification of p .

3) *Circularity*: it is another alternative to regression in which a proposition p relies on an implicit premise within itself to establish the truth of that same proposition p . Given that it is not possible to establish which belief justifies the other, we should if rational suspend judgement.

Each of these horns is motivated by disagreement (*diaphonia*) between two contrary beliefs (p and $\text{not-}p$), a disagreement that each of them tries to resolve.

Given this trilemma, if infinite regress and circularity were vicious justificatory strategies,⁴ the dogmatist would be left with mere stipulation and he would leave his beliefs unjustified; and if rational, the dogmatist ought to withhold assent about the correctness of most, if not all, of his p 's.

Now, Williams (2001: 147, and 2004b: 129-130) claims that if the Agrippan trilemma is to amount to an argument for a radical and general scepticism about the possibility of epistemic justification, it must presuppose a *Prior Grounding Conception* of justification (PGC), and if so, then Pyrrhonian scepticism won't be natural or intuitive,⁵ something that Williams believes it must be, if it is to

⁴ Cf., for example, A. Cling (2004) for an argument for the viciousness of the mode of regress and Cíntora, A. (2010) for an argument for the viciousness of the mode of circularity. On the other hand, Alston (1986: 1-30 and 1993) and Sosa (1994: 263-290 and 2004: 113-122) have defended circularity, while Klein (2000 and 2005) has defended an infinitist conception of justification.

⁵ Stroud (1984: 39), on the other hand, considers sceptical doubts as intuitive, while Williams has argued (1992) that they are unnatural; more on this dispute in Stroud (1996) and in Williams (1996). The debate about the intuitiveness of the

be a serious problem for our ordinary attributions of knowledge. Williams (2001: 147 and 2004b: 129) analyzes the PGC as follows:

(PG₁) “Personal justification does not accrue to us: it must be earned by epistemically responsible behaviour.”

(PG₂) “It is never epistemically responsible to believe a proposition true when one’s grounds for believing it true are less than adequate.”

(PG₃) “Grounds are evidence: propositions that count in favour of the truth of the proposition believed.”

(PG₄) “For a person’s belief to be adequately grounded, it is not sufficient for there merely to be appropriate evidence for it. Rather, the believer himself or herself must possess (and make proper use of) evidence that makes the proposition believed (very) likely to be true.”

If so, Agrippa’s trilemma assumes an *internalist* requirement for justification for which *every* instance of justification rests on other justifying beliefs accessible to the subject. Thus, PG₁ and PG₂ try to satisfy the deontological character of epistemic justification, PG₃ establishes a dependence of responsibility on a grounding which excludes any kind of externalist characterization of grounding, while PG₃ and PG₄ together prescribe that the grounds to believe *p* must be *evidence* cognitively accessible to the subject. Williams’ PGC recalls the Aristotelian demonstrative conception of knowledge (*An. Post.* 1.2) according to which, *S* knows *p* iff (1) *S* has a justification *q* for *p*, and (2) *S* knows the justification *q*.

To clarify Williams’ analysis of the PGC it is useful to realize that Williams, (1999b: 187 and 2004b: §2) —following Fogelin (1994: ch.1)— recognizes two dimensions for justification: “epistemic responsibility” and “adequate grounding”. Responsibility is subjective —personal— justification according

Agrippan trilemma is central for Williams’ argument; he considers — as Fogelin (1994: ch 3) — that if Agrippa’s argument weren’t intuitive, then it would be as controversial as the philosophical theories it presupposes, and then it wouldn’t be a serious epistemic problem, *cf.*, Williams (2004b: 126).

to which *S* is justified in believing *p* iff *S* has satisfied his epistemic duties, in particular the (internalist) requirement of accessibility to the reasons on behalf of *S*; and as in any traditional deontic conception of justification epistemic responsibility may be not truth conducive. On the other hand, adequate grounding is objective justification, where “adequate” means truth conducive, even if *S* has not epistemic access to that justification (William’s favourite account of adequate grounding is reliabilism.)

Both aspects of justification are logically independent: we can be epistemically responsible and end citing as our evidence false propositions, or we can have adequate grounding without epistemic access to it. These two axes are, however, related in so far as we value epistemic responsibility, because this responsibility reduces the risk of error “and this makes epistemically responsible behavior itself a kind of grounding” (Williams, 2004b: 128).

Williams claims that the Agrippan sceptic assumes the PGC because this sceptic always considers a demand for justification as reasonable — a dialectical demand — without the PGC the sceptic loses his right to make this demand unrestrictedly:

To get from what he argues to what he concludes, the sceptic must take it for granted that no belief is responsibly held unless it rests on adequate and citable evidence. He needs the Prior Grounding Requirement (2001: 148, 150).

For Williams’ PGC the distinction between responsibility and grounding collapses, thus every case of responsible belief is believing always on the basis of explicit and citable *evidence* and this opens the gates to the sceptic, since there will be basic beliefs for which we won’t be able to offer evidentialist justifications.

If we grant Williams this diagnosis of Agrippa’s trilemma, he then proceeds to oppose to the PGC a *Default and Challenge Conception* (DChC), which is characterized in terms of the difference:

... Between legal systems that treat the accused as guilty unless proved innocent and those that do the opposite, granting presumptive innocence and throwing the burden of proof onto the accuser. Adopting the second model epistemic entitlement is the default status of a person's beliefs and assertions. One is entitled to a belief or assertion (...) in the absence of appropriate 'defeaters': that is, reasons to think that one is *not* so entitled.⁶ Appropriate defeaters cite reasonable and relevant error-possibilities (...) In claiming knowledge, I commit myself to my belief's *being* adequately grounded –formed by a reliable method– but not to my having *already established* its well-groundedness. This sort of defence is necessary only given an appropriate challenge: a positive reason to think that I reached my belief in some unreliable manner (2001: 149).

The DChC requires some *prima facie* entitlements in order to have any process of epistemic criticism, that is, to generate defeaters. This because to criticize a statement you must take for granted some background beliefs. Thus, as a matter of fact, the DChC requires some entitlements likely to be both taken for granted and uncriticizable, this because of logical reasons, (as it will be argued further below.) These entitlements are *assumed by default* –without any *positive* reasons in their favour–, so the DChC is a kind of *dogmatism*, one where a dogma is a belief assumed as correct without positive reasons or first order justification. Williams conflates a dialectic argumentative process

⁶ Furthermore, Williams (2001: 149) affirms that there are two main sorts of defeaters: i) Non epistemic ones which "give *evidence* in order to show that one's assertion is false", and ii) "Epistemic defeaters", "which give *grounds* for suspecting that one's belief was acquired in an unreliable or irresponsible way." (Gettier's counterexamples appeal only to the second type, while sceptical scenarios appeal to both.)

with one of epistemic justification, thus he tries to isolate a domain of beliefs –the entitlements– from demands of justification.

Default reasoning is an argumentative strategy that various authors have imported from Artificial Intelligence into Epistemology,⁷ it considers some propositions as *prima facie* justified if there don't exist any undefeated negative reasons –or second order reasons– for claiming these propositions, it is asserted that such propositions are justified by default, even if they lack any positive reasons –or first order reasons– backing them up. More precisely, if a position has not undefeated criticisms, or if it does not have any relevant alternatives it would be justified, even if it lacks positive reasons in its favour, where the relevant alternatives would be those psychologically palatable, or those reasonable given the coherence of the conceptual scheme in question.

Williams' default position is dogmatic, in so far as its entitlements lack a positive epistemic justification (they only have a justification by default); it is now necessary to distinguish at least two different types of dogmatism: Epistemic and non-epistemic. In order to clarify the differences between them, let us focus on the supposed justificatory force of our sensorial perceptions. Those who take perception at face value are able to appeal to perceptual beliefs as *evidence* in favour of empirical beliefs (that is, whenever they do not have a stronger defeater or better reasons to suppose that their perceptual beliefs are false).

Thus, to justify my empirical belief 'there is a hand in front of me', I appeal to my perceptual belief –'I see a hand in front

⁷ Bach (1984 and 1985) was one of the first to introduce default reasoning in epistemological discussions, as a matter of fact, his taking-for-granted rule preludes contemporary dogmatic theses, amongst these that of Williams himself, thus Bach says: "If it seems to me that *p*, then infer that *p*, provided no reason to the contrary occurs to me". Horty (2012) has recently modeled this type of inference with a logic of reasoning by default, and he has stressed the basic role played by this type of reasoning as providing the givens for other types of reasoning, and thus making them possible.

of me'— as a justification for the *truth* of my empirical belief. Furthermore, epistemic dogmatists consider their perceptual *experiences* as *evidence* in favour of the truth of their perceptual beliefs, and in this way they avoid an epistemic regression of justifications. This Moorean stance is what we call here “epistemic dogmatism”,⁸ where the dogma is the assumption that my visual system is reliable, an assumption taken for granted without any positive epistemic justification, and required for our perceptual experiences to function as *justificans*.

On the other hand, there are others for whom perception can have justificatory force, only if we first justify a belief in the existence of the external world (that is, if we first justify the reliability of our visual system), but according to the lesson taught by Cartesian type scenarios it seems impossible to have *evidence* in favour of this belief. Many thinkers —following Hume's naturalism⁹— have argued, therefore, that we can retain a rational belief in the existence of the external world (rational in a pragmatic sense, but not in a theoretical —epistemological— sense) by appealing to some ingrained psychological, social, cultural or pragmatic mechanism, which would impose this belief to us. These theoreticians are known as non-epistemic dogmatists.

Defenders of non-epistemic dogmatism consider as dogmas some very basic beliefs, which instead of being justified by some truth conducive evidence are merely described or explained via their pragmatic or psychological import and then it is claimed that this description-explanation provides a ‘justification’ of sorts for these central beliefs, such as a belief in the existence of the external world.

⁸ This position can be traced to Aristotle (*Met.* 4.4), and it is a position that James Pryor (2000: 519 and 2004) has rehabilitated in contemporary epistemological debate. See also Humer (2001: 97). For a critical commentary on Pryor's dogmatism see our (forthcoming).

⁹ Cf., Strawson (1985) coined the term “naturalism” for Hume's anti-sceptical stance and since then it has been a common place to link a Humean anti-sceptical strategy with Wittgenstein's treatment of scepticism in *On Certainty*.

Non-epistemic dogmatism has become a recurrent stratagem in contemporary epistemology, mainly because it has been offered as an antidote against Cartesian type sceptical challenges;¹⁰ Williams' DChC implies a non-epistemic dogmatism.¹¹

Williams, however, asserts that justification by default is not tantamount to uncriticisable assumptions,¹² that is, these entitlements are allegedly open to concrete and justified challenges (though we will argue contra Williams further below, that not everything is challengeable or criticisable). In Williams' perspective the subject must be able to answer these types of challenges in order to have epistemic responsibility, on the other hand, claims of knowledge can be grounded externalistically

¹⁰ For example, Crispin Wright (2004) has argued in favour of a kind of non-epistemic dogmatism in order to reject Cartesian and Humean scepticism, according to which there are some "cornerstone" beliefs (such as the belief about the existence of external world), which we would take as justified not by truth conducive *evidence*, but by psychological or pragmatic considerations. These beliefs would be rational not in the sense of theoretical rationality with its demand for epistemic justification, but rather rational for practical reason; these cornerstones would be epistemic "entitlements". William's non-epistemic dogmatism is analogous to Wright's, where the difference between their positions is that while Williams' dogmas allegedly change with context, those of Wright are fixed for all contexts.

¹¹ Brandom (1994) and Leite (2005) share with Williams a non-epistemic dogmatism, a doctrine that they articulate with a 'dialectical foundationalism', this last position holds "that some propositions require no defence in the light of mere requests for justification" (*cf.*, Rescorla, 2009: 43). Notice that dogmatism is a more basic position than foundationalism in so far as it doesn't imply substantive theses on the structure of justification.

¹² Williams is following here Brandom's (1994: ch. 4) conception of justification. For Brandom any attribution of knowledge implies the attribution of inferential *commitments* and *entitlements* on the part of the various interlocutors. Brandom argues for the necessity of some unjustified commitments with positive epistemic status, that means that there are some entitlements that are taken for granted, but which, nevertheless, are criticisable. Williams himself recognizes (2001: p. 158-9, footnote 2) his debt with Brandom, the idea, however, behind the Brandom-Williams' conception of justification can be traced to Carneades (Cicero, *Academica*: II, 32) and especially to Austin (1961).

(appealing, for example, to the alleged or putative reliability of some cognitive processes).

The main difference between the PGC and DChC is that for the former justification is exclusively an inferential matter; that is, any entitlement must be the conclusion of an inference from other premises, and these premises must be at least potentially accessible to the subject, and hence they are a personal or individual achievement. On the other hand, the DChC allows entitlements by default, which may not be an individualistic achievement, but a social one. DChC retains the relation between responsibility and grounding, but in a deflationary way: it does not require that the subject be able to sustain responsibly *every* claim to knowledge.

Critical Comments

1. *Default entitlements seem to be a euphemism for unjustified dogma*

Williams complains that:

The PGR generates a vicious regress of justification by enforcing a gross asymmetry in the justificational responsibilities of claimants and challengers. Because claimants are saddled with a standing obligation to cite evidence, challengers are accorded a standing licence to request that it be cited (2001: 151).

Sure there is an asymmetry, but this results from the dogmatist's claim to knowledge, and since he claims knowledge, a request for justification is just natural. Williams' DChC passes the onus of the proof from the claimant to the challenger: *why should we doubt the reliability of our cognitive faculties?* But transferring the onus of the proof to my opponent –even if it were a legitimate move– would not justify my claim, thus, Williams' default entitlements seem to be a euphemism for unjustified dogma (not an epistemic dogma, but a non-epistemic one), i.e., a euphemism for the mode

of hypothesis. For example, if the reliability of allegedly reliable processes can be taken for granted, without positive justification, as epistemic entitlements, this is dogmatism with a constrained and self-serving conception of epistemic responsibility, where unjustified dogmas, nevertheless justify. Thus for Williams' epistemic responsibility requires only that one responds to appropriate challenges, and hence the DChC leads merely to *dialectical* justification: to conveniently shared assumptions.

If we are interested in truth (if we are interested in relevant and justified true beliefs) we require a positive justification (in the sense of *grounding*) of objective reliability and not mere shared agreements, say about the alleged reliability of some cognitive processes, methods, sources or rules of inference: we require more than mere psychological, social or cultural inclinations to believe in their reliability.¹³

2. *The DChC seems to lead to a form of epistemic relativism*

Williams requires that appropriate defeaters "cite reasonable and relevant error-possibilities." (2001: 149). Then it seems that a community could be epistemically entitled to whatever beliefs it might fancy just by discounting challenges as irrelevant and/or unreasonable –given their background beliefs or alleged entitlements. One could imagine, for example, an ideological or religious community (say, of 'scientific creationists' or of Lysenkoists) which would discount challenges to some of its core beliefs (say, about the origin of life in our planet or about genetics) as unreasonable, absurd or heretical and which would ignore or explain away any empirical inadequacies via *ad hoc* hypotheses. This putative community could then go on to argue that *ad hoc* hypotheses are kosher whenever its core beliefs or principles (for example that revelation is a reliable source of knowledge) are challenged; they could go on to claim that this last methodological

¹³ Clearly even if a dialectical process were to end with some shared claims (agreements which we might be incapable or disinclined to question) from this fact it would not follow that they would be objectively justified as correct.

prescription is one of their epistemic entitlements. If so, the DChC seems to lead to a form of epistemic relativism, where what is reasonable depends on cultural or psychological biases.

3. *The DChC may be ad hoc*

For Williams the claimant is entitled to his claims by default, that is, if there aren't any challenges and although Agrippa provides a general challenge Williams disqualifies the Agrippan challenge, since it is not a concrete and detailed challenge, but a global or a "brute challenge" (allegedly a presuppositionless challenge, although Williams argues that Agrippa tacitly presupposes the PGC) (2004b: 133-4).¹⁴ Now, if this injunction against general and brute challenges and doubts were motivated only by a desire to evade sceptical challenges, then it would be an *ad hoc* manoeuvre, but Williams has explicitly condemned *ad hoc* tactics [Cf. Williams (2001:155, *supra.*)], so if consistent he cannot welcome them. Alternatively, if his prescription is not an *ad hoc* stratagem, then what is the justification of this injunction? Williams may retort that the DChC is not *ad hoc* because it allegedly describes our everyday epistemic practice and that would be its justification; moreover even if

... both models [the PGC and the DChC] proved to fit everyday epistemic practices more or less equally well –it would still be theoretically reasonable to prefer the default and challenge

¹⁴ "[T]he Default and Challenge conception entails that questions of justification always arise in a definite context, so that global doubts and global justifications are equally out of order." (Williams, 2001: 178). Against this Rescorla (2009:52-54) argues that Williams' injunction against brute challenges results from not separating the domain of argumentative discourse from the domain of epistemic justification: while an epistemic foundationalist can introduce some non-doxastic mental states as foundations to end a regress, the same is not possible in an argumentative conversation given that in the later, there is no privileged class of beliefs immune to challenges, since the putative foundational non-doxastic mental states of my interlocutor are beyond my experience, since they cannot be shared.

account. By hypothesis, that model fits the agreed facts equally well and has the added merit of not generating gratuitous, sceptical paradoxes. It is therefore a better account of ordinary justification (2001: 153).

And yet

4. *The DChC is not a tout court adequate description of our everyday epistemic practice*

There are reasons, however to doubt that the DChC is closer to our ordinary epistemic practice. Thus, we are told that appropriate challenges can be “defeaters [that] cite evidence that *one’s assertion is false*” (Williams, 2001: 149, emphasis added). Williams doesn’t consider, however, the possibility of *balanced evidence* for or against an assertion, neither the possibility of the *absence* of any evidence for the truth of a statement. Our ordinary practice would recommend suspension of judgement about the truth of the assertion in these situations. This is a suspension of judgement that the PGC would recommend, but not the DChC, so the PGC seems closer to our ordinary practice at least in certain situations. So, consider the following example:

1. One observes a red-looking wall
2. That wall is red
3. Putative entitlement: My visual system is working properly

Where (1) justifies (2), given (3). Now suppose that: “you are knowledgeably participating in a double-blind trial of a new hallucinogen, affecting just colour vision. Half the trialists have the pill and half a placebo. The trialists are advised that the former group will suffer a temporary systematic inversion of their colour experience, but have no other relevant information, in particular none providing any reason for a view about which group they are in. Clearly this information defeats (1) as a warrant for (2). Its effect is that your evidence (1) now provides no reason whatever

for believing (2). But it does not give sufficient reason to *doubt* (3) if that is required to mean: to believe not 3. You should be open minded about (3)" (Wright, 2007: 41).

Open-mindedness about (3) will defeat the warrant of (1) for (2). Now, if *balanced* evidence for and against (3) defeats the warrant provided by (1) for (2), it then seems that the *absence* of evidence for (3) should also defeat the warrant provided by (1) for (2) (or if not, why not?). So that if (1) is going to provide sufficient warrant for (2), it seems one would require an independent warrant for (3) whenever there is balanced evidence for and against 3, *or when there is no evidence for 3: precisely what PGC recommends*. If so, the DChC does not agree *simpliciter* with our everyday epistemic practice. But neither is the DChC in agreement with our dialectical practice since any challenge is legitimate, even brute challenges. This because brute challenges don't contradict any rule of rational discourse,¹⁵ if so, in a reasoned dialogue there is not a privileged class of beliefs immune to challenge.

5. *The DChC begs the question against the sceptic*

Williams (2004b: 133) uses our alleged everyday epistemic practice, as the criterion to decide which of the two conceptions of justification in competition (PGC and DChC) is most natural and intuitive. Now, if DChC were *malgré tout* closer to our ordinary epistemic practice, it would not be surprising that whatever injunctions we might get from this practice would be anti-sceptical, since our ordinary practice has a built-in-bias against scepticism by assuming common sense, or armchair knowledge.¹⁶ Appealing to our ordinary epistemic practice is a pragmatic strategy that begs the question against the sceptic.

¹⁵ Cf., Rescorla, 2009: 54 and ff.

¹⁶ If the PGC were closer to our ordinary epistemic practice (as it was argued above), then it would be difficult to see how the Agrippa, a sceptical argument, could presuppose — via the PGC — our ordinary practice with its anti sceptical bias; a presupposition that Williams claims.

On the other hand, what is intuitive and natural for some –in an ordinary context of investigation– is not always so for others, as it is shown by the wide disagreements of intuitions amongst epistemologists.

6. *Williams grants an unjustified epistemic privilege to our everyday epistemic practice, and its alleged DChC, even when Williams, the philosopher, is debating with the philosophical sceptic*

There are alternative criteria, i.e., non-ordinary epistemic practices, such as our philosophical epistemic practices, and these latter practices have more stringent standards of scrutiny. In particular, in a philosophical level of scrutiny –as this one– nothing, or very little, ought to be considered as obvious or ought to be taken for granted as an entitlement; hence even if both the PGC and the DChC turned out to fit evenly our ordinary epistemic practice, it seems that the PGC (with its global requirement of justification for claims of knowledge) would fit better our philosophical practice. Thus Stroud (1989 and 1996) has argued that philosophy is interested in human knowledge in *general* and that for philosophy global questions about our knowledge are *unavoidable*.

Our philosophical practice can be understood as an endeavour where cognitive subjects aim to full rationality and complete epistemic responsibility, as regulatory cognitive ideals, even if full rationality and epistemic responsibility may never be fully attained (as some sceptics would argue), even if these aims can only be approximated till some unknown maxima, and with an uncertain approximation process. Our ordinary epistemic practice due to pragmatic constraints will often ignore these ideals and fall short of these maxima, but we can (and should) ignore these pragmatic constraints while in a philosophical context.

Now, from a contextualist perspective, as that of Williams,¹⁷ one should raise the epistemic standards (that is they should not be kept invariant) to the philosophical level of scrutiny (and opt for the PGC) when arguing with the philosophical sceptic. Yet, Williams seems to grant priority to our everyday epistemic practices, their practical considerations and their alleged DChC, even when debating with the philosophical sceptic, so as to conclude that the sceptic is misguided. Why this unjustified bias in favour of the practical constraints of our ordinary practice?

7. *Due to logical reasons not any claim can even in principle be challenged: not any claim can be rationally argued to be false or incorrect, something the DChC seems to assume*

Williams has criticized a strongly justificationist conception of rationality (2001:87), one for which it is always irrational to hold beliefs that are not adequately justified (on the basis of evidence); this is a conception of rationality that goes hand in hand with the PGC. Given his criticism, Williams should have an alternative conception of rationality, an alternative conception could accommodate his DChC of justification as rational. He could then go on to recommend that if rational one should give preference to the DChC over the PGC. This last injunction — given his pragmatist affinities (2001:241) — would require that one should be able to act according to the DChC. If so, the question now arises if any claim can, *at least in principle*, be challenged. The following argument shows — by a *reductio* — that such a pancriticism would lead to logical paradox and that it is therefore impossible. Thus:

(A): All positions are open to criticism or challenge.

¹⁷ Williams' contextualism is radically different from traditional or "attributor contextualism" defended by Lewis (1996), DeRose (1995 and 1999) and Cohen (1988). Consult Williams 2004a for a detailed account of the difference between his contextualism and attributor contextualism.

And because of what 'A' asserts, because of its intended comprehensiveness, it then follows,

(B): A is open to criticism. And,

Since (B) is implied by (A), any criticism of (B) will constitute a criticism of (A), and thus show that (A) is open to criticism. Assuming that a criticism of (B) *argues* that (B) is false,¹⁸ we may argue: if (B) is false, then (A) is false; but an argument showing (A) to be false (and thus criticizing it) shows (B) to be true. Thus, if (B) is false, then (B) is true. Any attempt to criticize (B) demonstrates (B); thus (B) is uncriticisable, and (A) is false.¹⁹

Hence we discover that while the search for justification (either of a first order evidentialist justification of some proposition, or of a second order justification of the putative reliability of some cognitive processes or capacities²⁰) leads into Agrippa's trilemma and to alleged "sceptical paradoxes",²¹ the search for pancriticism, in its turn, leads to logical paradox, that is, we have discovered that due to logical reasons not every claim can, even in principle, be challenged: not every claim can be *argued to be false or incorrect*.

¹⁸ Surely one way to criticize a statement is to argue that it is false, and this would be an example of what Williams calls 'non-epistemic defeaters'.

¹⁹ Cf. Bartley, (1984: 224).

²⁰ A demand for the justification of the putative reliability of cognitive processes or capacities leads to an Agrippan trilemma; thus if we ask for a justification of the reliability of our memory, we might try to satisfy this request with an inductive argument. An inductive argument that will have to assume a reliable memory, and then we end with circularity. If we also demand a justification for the reliability of the inductive inference the problem reappears.

²¹ Williams (2001: 154) considers paradoxical that the PGC of justification "represents our ordinary practices of epistemic assessment as self-defeating." This appraisal of paradoxicalness follows only if we were to consider that both scepticism and our ordinary practices could be correct, if one or both of them is incorrect, then there is no paradox.

Which of these two paradoxes to favour seems to be a matter of taste, a matter of temperament, and if *de gustibus non disputandum est*, then the matter would end there, and from the perspective of their paradoxicalness, which of the two conceptions of justification (PGC or DChC) to elect would be a matter of taste or temperament.

Williams could reply, however, that pancriticism's logical paradox can be avoided by granting that some entitlements cannot be challenged, that some entitlements are context independent, that is, that there are entitlements —or “methodological necessities” (2001: 160)— that are so, in any and every epistemic context. But if he were to concede that some entitlements are shared by every context of inquiry, then there would be a tension with his rejection of *epistemological realism* (1992: ch. 3)²² —his rejection of the idea that beliefs fall into epistemological natural kinds exclusively in virtue of their content. This because if the DChC were to imply that some entitlements (say perceptual and memory beliefs) are such in every research context, then these entitlements would belong to a privileged epistemic class, something that would explain their universality.²³ Therefore either Williams abandons the DChC and its tacit conception of rationality: pancriticism, or he welcomes epistemological realism.

²² Grundmann (2004) has raised a similar objection.

²³ On the other hand, Williams seems to side with a contextualized form of non-epistemic dogmatism, thus:

“In a particular discipline, there will be certain quite general presuppositions that serve to give that discipline its characteristic shape and subject-matter. I like to call them “methodological necessities”. Together, they determine the *disciplinary meta-context* for all inquires of a certain genre. ...[A] form of inquiry that was presuppositionless would be no form of inquiry at all.” (Williams, 2004: 332 and 333). This non-epistemic dogmatism seems to be incompatible with Williams' epistemological anti-realism.

8. *The PGC should be selected if we value beliefs that are nonarbitrary from our own point of view: that is, if we value beliefs justified by reasons accessible to ourselves*

Having nonarbitrary beliefs is desirable if we value rational intellectual autonomy, the ideal of basing one's beliefs on nonarbitrary reasons, and such that we believe these basing reasons. If so, aspects of one's self would control one's beliefs "perhaps aspects of one's self that one identifies with or that are in some other way genuine" (Cling, A., 2009). But even if this ideal were impossible to fully satisfy, it is still a valuable goal, and a rational aim, rational, because although it might be unreachable, it seems it may be approximated without a *known* upper limit.²⁴

Conclusion

If the PGC were the better conception of epistemic justification (as it seems to be in a philosophical research context, and at least sometimes for our ordinary practice), then Agrippa's trilemma would show that not everything is justifiable without falling into one of its unpalatable horns, and if regress and circularity were vicious justificatory strategies, then we would be left only with stipulation.

These stipulations (epistemic dogmas) *won't* justify because they cannot inherit what they lack — a positive epistemic status— but if they were justified they would justify our various beliefs. We could believe these stipulations only *as if they were* true or correct, while suspending judgment about their *objective* truth-value: that is, we would not accept them to be objectively true.²⁵ We would

²⁴ Cf., Cíntora A. (2006) for an argument in favour of the rationality of some impossible goals. Cling (2009) argues that the chase after this ideal can itself be valuable, because although we cannot get the kind of justification to which we aspire, we may in the process acquire better ("excellent") reasons.

²⁵ Lammenranta (2008: §11) informs us that some commentators of pyrrhonism suggest that these sceptics distinguished between two kinds of

only have a passive and involuntary belief in these stipulations, this, by passively following our psychological propensities and what *appear* to be our social and cultural uses and customs at some time *t*.²⁶ Possible examples of such stipulations or dogmas (both likely to be unjustifiable, as well as, uncriticisable) could be *modus ponens*, a probabilistic inductive rule of inference, the reliability of sources of knowledge, basic criteria of proper evidence, criteria of rational belief, criteria of rational action, criteria for desirable goals, and criteria on how to prioritize these goals — when these goals are inconsistent.

These stipulations while epistemically arbitrary can be motivated, or caused, by extra epistemic factors — although this creates the logical possibility²⁷ of a relativism of different and incompatible dogmas. This is an innocuous relativism, since one would suspend judgement about the objective truth-value of these stipulations. The most basic dogma would be the following conditional:

If our dogmatic presuppositions were —per impossibile— justified as true, then those true beliefs justified by these presuppositions would be real knowledge.

We can proceed in our ordinary life, and in our scientific investigations, hoping that this conditional be correct, something that it could well be, given the success of our science and technology, and because given this success, Agrippa's aporia could well be wrong. This hope, however, may be a-rational

assent: "Let's call them belief and acceptance. Belief is a passive state produced in us by various causal processes and is not under our direct voluntary control. Acceptance is a voluntary act of judging something to be true, and it needs to be based on reasons. When the skeptic thus suspends judgment, she refrains from accepting anything as true. At the same time, she goes on forming beliefs involuntary."

²⁶ This recalls Kuhn's position for which good reasons are those generally accepted by the scientific community, while suspending judgement about their objective goodness. Cf. Kuhn in Lakatos and Musgrave (1970: 21).

²⁷ 'Scientific' creationists illustrate that this scenario is not just a logical possibility.

—or irrational— because it cannot itself be justified without our unjustified dogmatic presuppositions.

That both criticisability and justifiability are logically limited is of course not new;²⁸ Wittgenstein (and more recently J. Worrall) seems to have arrived at similar conclusions.²⁹ If so, there would be little, if any, *real* knowledge (that is, if genuine knowledge requires either the justification or criticism of our absolute presuppositions³⁰), although following dominant custom and usage we could grant these dogmas a honorary justifying role and we could call ‘knowledge’ (because of a principle of charity) those true beliefs justified by these dogmas.

It may now be argued that we don’t need real knowledge, that plain ‘knowledge’ is sufficient for our practical endeavours. It may be so, as long as nature doesn’t let us down or defeat us, that is, so long as our common epistemic practice, and our science and technology go on being successful, even though we don’t justify, or criticize their absolute presuppositions. This felicitous situation, however, seems to require the cooperation of a benevolent nature.³¹ The philosopher, though, would want to substitute this cooperation of nature, with a search for justifications (that is, with justifications that do not end in vicious circularity, vicious regress or dogmatic stipulation), but when we search for these justifications, we discover that they appear to be impossible, because of the logical argument provided by Agrippa’s argument

²⁸ That criticisability is logically limited was argued in critical comment 7 above, that justifiability is logically limited follows from the putative correctness of the Agrippa.

²⁹ *Cf.*, Wittgenstein, 1975: OC: §163-4, 253, 341, 343; J. Worrall more recently has argued that some very basic scientific methodological principles are unjustifiable and de facto ahistorical once mature science arrives; while Popper argued (1945: chapter 24) that a minimalist dogmatism or irrationalism is inescapable, again for a critical commentary *cf.*, Cíntora, A. (2005 and 2010).

³⁰ As R. Collingwood called them, though Collingwood thought they could change.

³¹ *Cf.*, Wittgenstein, 1975: §505, on the other hand, nature’s cooperation might have an evolutionary explanation.

(nor seem these presuppositions to be criticizable due to the paradoxicalness of pancriticism.)³²

References

- Alston, W. (1986), "Epistemic Circularity", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 47, 1:1-30.
- . (1993), *The Reliability of Sense Perception*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, USA.
- Austin, J. (1961), *Philosophical Papers*. OUP: Oxford, UK.
- Bach, K. (1985), "A Rationale for Reliabilism", *The Monist*, 68: 247-263.
- . (1984), "Default Reasoning: Jumping to Conclusions and Knowing When to Think Twice", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 65: 37-58
- Barnes, J. (1990), *The Toils of Scepticism*. CUP: Cambridge, UK.
- Bartley, W. W. (1984), *The Retreat to Commitment*. Open Court. Illinois.
- Brandson, R. (1994), *Making it explicit*, HUP: Harvard, Mass.
- Carroll, L. (1896), *Symbolic Logic*. Edited by W. W. Bartley, III. Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1977.
- Cíntora, A. (2005), *Los Presupuestos Irracionales de la Racionalidad*. Anthropos. Barcelona, España.
- . (2006), "Are Impossible Goals Rational? The Proceedings of the Twenty-first World Congress of Philosophy. Volume 9: Philosophical Anthropology. Ed. Stephen Vos.
- . (2010), "Pirronismo y Conocimiento Científico", *Revista de Filosofía, Universidad de Chile*, 66, 79-92.
- Cling, A. (2009), "Reasons, regresses, and tragedy: The epistemic regress problem and the problem of the criterion", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 46: 333-346.
- . (2004), "The trouble with infinitism", *Synthese*, 138: 101-123.

³² Cling (2009) arrives to an analogous conclusion, one that he calls a "tragic predicament".

Cohen, S. (1988), "How to be a Fallibilist", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2: 91-123.

Collingwood, R. (1940), *An Essay in Metaphysics*. Clarendon Press: Oxford, UK.

DeRose, K. (1999), "Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense", *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds.), Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 187- 205.

—. (1995), "Solving the Skeptical Problem", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2, 91-123.

Fogelin, R. (1994), *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. Oxford University Press.

Grundmann, T. (2004), "Inferential Contextualism, Epistemological Realism and Scepticism: Comments on Williams", *Erkenntnis*, 61: 345-352.

Hankinson, R. (1995), *The Sceptics*, Routledge: NY, USA.

Horty, J. (2012), *Reasons as Defaults*, Oxford: OUP.

Humer, M. (2001). *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.

Klein, P. (2005), "Infinism is the Solution to the Regress Problem", *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, E. Sosa and M. Steup, (eds.), pp. 131-139.

—. (2000), "Why not Infitism?", *Epistemology: Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress in Philosophy*, R. Cobb-Stevens, (ed.), 5, pp. 199-208.

Lakatos, I. and Musgrave, A. (eds.) (1970), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press.

Leite, A. (2008), "Believing one's reasons are good", *Synthese*, 161: 419-441.

Lammenranta, M. (2008), "The Pyrrhonian Problematic". *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, John Greco (ed.)

Lewis, D. (1996), "Elusive Knowledge", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74, 4: 549-67.

Ornelas, J. y Cíntora A. (forthcoming). "¿Qué está mal con el dogmatismo de Pryor?" *Areté*, 25, 1, diciembre 2013.

Popper, R. Karl. (1945), *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Routledge, London.

Pryor, J. (2004), "What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?", *Philosophical Issues*, 14, *Epistemology*, E. Sosa and E. Villanueva, (eds.), Blackwell Publishing, USA, 349-378.

— . (2000), "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist", *Nous*, 4, 517-549.

Rescorla, M. (2009), "Epistemic and Dialectical Regress", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 87, 1: 43-60.

Sextus Empiricus. (2000), *Outlines of Scepticism*, tr. Jonathan Barnes and Julia Annas, CUP, Cambridge, UK.

Sosa, E. (2004), "Circularity and Epistemic Priority", *The Externalist Challenge*, R. Schantz (ed.), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 113-122.

Strawson, P. (1985), *Skepticism and Naturalism: some varieties*, London: Methuen.

— . (1994), "Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity", *Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, 68: 263-290.

Stroud, B. (1996), "Epistemological Reflections on Knowledge of the External World", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 56, 2: 345-58.

— . (1989), "Understanding Human Knowledge in General", *Knowledge and Scepticism*, M. Clay and K. Lehrer, (eds.), Boulder, Colo.: West View Press.

— . (1984), *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, OUP: USA.

Williams, M. (2004a). "Knowledge, Reflection and Sceptical Hypotheses", *Erkenntnis*, 61: 315-343.

— . (2004b). "The Agrippan Argument and Two Forms of Skepticism", *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, (ed.), Oxford University Press, USA, pp. 121-145.

— . (2001), *Problems of Knowledge: a critical introduction to epistemology*. Oxford University Press. UK.

— . (1999a), “Scepticism”, *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, John Greco and Ernest Sosa, (eds.), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 35-69.

— . (1999b), *Groundless Beliefs*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, USA.

— . (1996), “Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 56, 2: 359-78.

— . (1992), *Unnatural Doubts. Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, USA.

Wittgenstein, L. (1975), *On Certainty*. G. E. M. Anscombe, and George Henrik von Wright (eds). Blackwell. UK.

Woodruff, P. (2010), “The Pyrrhonian Modes,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, R. Bett, (ed.), CUP, Cambridge, UK, 208–231.

Wright, C. (2007), “The Perils of Dogmatism”. En: Nuccetelli y Seay (eds.), *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays on Epistemology and Ethics*, pp. 25-48.

— . (2004), “Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 78, pp. 167-212.

Worrall, J. (1989), “Fix it and be Damned: A Reply to Laudan”, *Brit. J. Phil. Sci.* 40: 376-388. Great Britain.