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**Value Beyond Truth-Value: A Practical Response to Skepticism**

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I aim to offer a practical response to skepticism. I begin (in section one) by surveying a family of responses to skepticism that I term “dogmatic” and argue that they are problematically evasive; they do not address what I take to be a question that is central to many skeptics: Why am I justified in maintaining some beliefs that fail to meet ordinary standards of doxastic evaluation? I then turn (in section two) to a discussion of these standards of evaluation and to the different kinds of doxastic value to which they appeal. While there is something good about having a true belief and something bad about having a false one, I argue the value of true beliefs is not intrinsic or final. Truth and knowledge are valuable *because* they contribute to both individual and collective flourishing. But if contributing to flourishing is what ultimately provides truth with its value, then we have discovered another doxastic value. I call this kind of doxastic value “practical.” The practical response addresses the skeptic’s question by claiming that some beliefs can be justified by appealing to their practical, rather than alethic, value. In fleshing out this practical response (in section three) I contrast it both with dogmatic responses as well as some seemingly similar “practical” alternatives, namely Crispin Wright’s appeals to entitlements and Susanna Rinard’s “pragmatic skepticism.” I end (in section four) by addressing some objections.

1. Skeptical Challenges

Skeptical arguments come in many forms and are provided for a variety of reasons. In thinking about skeptical challenges and how to respond to them, it is often important to distinguish between varieties of skepticism. Yet, there is a common question that runs through them which focuses on the connection between “seems” and “is.” In his recent discussion of the history of epistemology, Robert Pasnau describes the radical skeptic who he calls the “epistemic defeatist” in these terms: “Just as the moral antirealist despairs of any argument that runs from *is* to *ought,* so the epistemic defeatist despairs of our ability to go from *seems* to *is.*” (2017, 129) Everyone agrees that there are times when what seems to be true to a particular subject can diverge from what *is* true. The skeptic’s arguments, whether they center on logical possibilities or hypotheses that cannot be ruled out (like, for example that you are a brain in a vat, or being radically deceived by an all-powerful demon), or bring to attention the limits of human reason or the fragility of our faculties, lead us to wonder whether anything *ever* is as it seems, or if there is any way for us to know that this is so. Here is one way the challenge can be posed:

**SC**: How can we know anything or have any justified beliefs if we cannot rule out skeptical possibilities or justify our justifying principles in a non-circular way?

While this challenge figures prominently in the history of philosophy without any response seeming adequate that didn’t ultimately appeal to God’s nature, somewhere around the beginning of the twenty-first century, we see a number of philosophers declaring that the skeptical problem has been “solved.” One gets the sense there was a growing feeling of annoyance or boredom with this problem, that focusing attention on it was distracting epistemologists from investigating more pressing matters. A number of ways of thinking about philosophical theorizing that gained prominence in the twentieth century provided material for what has come to be a standard response to skepticism. First, the “linguistic turn” led many to think of philosophical investigations as primarily focused on understanding our concepts by appealing to the way they are used in ordinary language. If we are focused on what we mean by the verb “to know” then it may well be that the standards for what count as knowledge shift according to the conversational context. This idea led to the contextualist solutions to the skeptical problem offered by, among others Keith DeRose (1995) and David Lewis (1999). Second, once epistemology is “naturalized” and the epistemologist is viewed as on a par with other scientists, studying knowledge the way geologists study rocks, then these skeptical questions seem illegitimate. If the geologist doesn’t have to prove rocks exist then why should the epistemologist have to prove knowledge does?

This naturalist tendency is seen both in various externalist views that allow for knowledge without doxastic justification, as well as the Moorean response which James Pryor’s (2000) influential paper has helped to make what I now take to be the most common and accepted response: dogmatism about some beliefs is acceptable. I can respond to the skeptic about the external world, for example, by saying that I need not find any way of ruling out skeptical hypotheses for my perceptual beliefs to be fully justified. Moore, and Reid before him, argues that none of the skeptic’s arguments which lead to the conclusion that one’s ordinary perceptual beliefs are not justified can be strong enough to undermine these beliefs. What better justification can there be for my belief that I have hands then that I can see them, feel them a use them? This kind of response says that the skeptic has illegitimately put the burden of proof on me to justify my ordinary beliefs when really the burden of proof is on the skeptic to offer me any reason to doubt them. [[1]](#footnote-1)

All these contemporary treatments of skepticism try to offer a way of insulating ordinary beliefs and knowledge from skeptical concerns, showing that the possibilities the skeptic raises are beside the point, that they need not be seen as threats. Further it is often taken that if one tries to meet the skeptical challenge head-on, arguing that we are justified in believing or claiming to know that skeptical scenarios do not hold, we are doomed to fail. I will refer to these responses as “dogmatic” responses. Here are some representative quotations:

Contrary to what the skeptic says, it is not a precondition for having perceptual justification for believing p that one have other, antecedently justified beliefs that one could appeal to without begging the question against the skeptic. What it’s reasonable for us to believe can outstrip what we’re able to defend in a non question-begging way. (Pryor, 2000)

What we fail to realize, according to the contextualist solution, is that the skeptic's present denials that we know various things are perfectly compatible with our ordinary claims to know those very propositions. Once we realize this, we can see how both the skeptic's denials of knowledge and our ordinary attributions of knowledge can be correct. (DeRose 1995)

In this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe. It may perhaps be conceded that the arguments of the skeptic appear to be utterly compelling; but the Mooreans among us will hold that the very plausibility of our ordinary beliefs is reason enough for supposing that there must be something wrong in the skeptic’s arguments, even if we are unable to say what it is. (Fine, 2001)

These dogmatic responses evade some deeply important questions that arise when confronted with skepticism. They offer a way of making sense of our being justified or knowing many things even if we cannot offer a non-circular justification for some of the beliefs that those ordinary beliefs presuppose, like, for example, that there is an actual world that is causally related to my perceptions in a fairly straightforward way, what I will call “the external world hypothesis” or “belief in the external world.” But they fail to address the nature of and status of one’s belief in those presuppositions. Part of the point of these responses is to offer a principled way of avoiding questions about *those* beliefs. Some may argue that if my perception of my hand justifies my belief that I have a hand, my justified belief that I have hands rules out that I am a handless brain in a vat (for example). But again this view fails to acknowledge that there is a difference in my epistemological relationship to most of the ordinary propositions I believe and the fundamental presuppositions I hold that seem to be unshakable, immune to criticism.

There is an important difference between these kinds of beliefs, and more ordinary beliefs, such as, “Those animals in the zoo are zebras,” or “The train leaves at 5 o’clock.” Even if all competing epistemologists agreed that I *know* these more ordinary empirical propositions—they are based on sufficient evidence, they are the output of a reliable cognitive mechanism, they are formed in an environment where no relevant alternatives would undermine claims to know—it could turn out that I am wrong, and nothing terrible would happen. We are used to ordinary knowledge claims being defeated. Our epistemic position regarding the falsity of skeptical hypotheses (like the hypothesis that we are brains in vats or that other people are actually automata) is importantly different from our position regarding things we ordinarily claim to know.

In his discussion of how ordinary knowledge is possible, Robert Nozick makes the distinction vivid. He says even if all the evidence available to him would be the same if his children were automata, so that he cannot *know* that his children are not automata, this does not undermine his belief that his children are not automata. Further, he says, he would stake his life on his children not being automata. This is dramatic language but I think it points to something important; there is a sense in which our lives depend on holding certain beliefs, at least the kind of life that makes sense to us.

Some of the dogmatic responses will acknowledge there is a difference between most ordinary beliefs and the ones that are in some sense “foundational.” They will say, for example, as we see in the Pryor quotation above, that we are justified in believing some things even if we cannot offer a non-question begging justification for them, which is not the case for most ordinary beliefs. While circular reasoning is usually problematic, Michael Bergman (2004) argues that when it comes to our justifying principles it is benign.

But these responses avoid the question as to why the standards of evaluation differ when it comes to certain kinds of beliefs.[[2]](#footnote-2) Such an avoidance, I contend, misses what is of most value and interest in engaging with skepticism. Many self-proclaimed skeptics, most notably David Hume, were not interested in showing that none of our beliefs are justified, or that no belief is more justified than any other, or even that we cannot have knowledge.[[3]](#footnote-3) This was a what Hume’s critics (including Reid) said of him but such a view makes no sense of the normative judgments he makes about beliefs, that he thought a kind of reproach appropriate when believing in certain ways. For example, he says that beliefs that are a result of prejudice, namely beliefs formed on the basis of “general rules contrary to present observation and experience,” are “errors.”It is similarly an error if I believe *x* rather than *y* simply because *x* occurred more recently and is thus conceived by my mind in a more lively manner. The man who trembles when looking at the precipice below him, despite the complete security afforded by the iron cage he is in, ought not to believe he is in danger. In the first *Enquiry*, Hume famously says, “A wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence.” [[4]](#footnote-4)

So the more interesting question is not to ask why I know that have two hands, or that I am typing on a computer right now. I can offer answers to these as well as most of my ordinary beliefs. And whether the answers are good ones may well depend on one’s view about justification and evidence. But if I am asked why I believe the “external world hypothesis,” I cannot offer an easy answer. To say I believe it because it is a logical implication of my knowing that I have two hands is disingenuous. My taking it that my seeing I have two hands is sufficient justification for believing that I do already presupposes that there is an external world that is reliably accessed through perception.

Although Hume, like Reid and Moore, did not take our inability to offer an answer as a reason to view our entire system of justification as being in jeopardy, he did acknowledge a tension in our way of evaluating beliefs. The belief in the external world along with perhaps a few other “foundational’ or “framework” beliefs cannot be defended the way most beliefs can. Unlike other beliefs that cannot be given evidential support, like for example belief in miracles or belief that Irishmen lack wit, Hume does not recommend abandoning our belief in the external world. And why not? Hume’s answer is not satisfying. He says: “it is in vain to ask, Whether there be body or not? That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings.”

But this is what I take to be the interesting and important question raised by the skeptic, and is a slightly different challenge than the one posed in **SC** which is

**SC2:**  Why is it permissible to maintain our belief in the external world even though it fails to meet regular standards used in doxastic evaluation?

Another way of putting the question: Why is it permissible to maintain our belief even if it is fails to meet the requirements of justification that normally call for us to abandon our beliefs? I will argue that once we have a better understanding of what makes a belief valuable we can answer that question and offer a response to the skeptic that is preferable to the dogmatist response.

1. Kinds of Doxastic Value

Beliefs can be evaluated according to numerous different criteria of assessment. An obvious, and important dimension of assessment pertains to the truth of the belief. There is something good about having a true belief and something bad about having a false one. But are all true beliefs valuable just in virtue of being true? Is my having a true belief about the number of threads in the carpet a valuable one? A further important question in terms of assessing a belief relates to how it was acquired and why it is held. If I happen, as a matter of luck, to have a true belief even though all my evidence and reasons point toward the belief’s falsehood, then there is some sense in which I am believing badly; my belief has some disvalue. This is because my belief would be negatively evaluated according to another important criterion for assessing belief, and one that has been of central concern to epistemologists, namely the belief’s justification. Most contemporary epistemologists agree that one can have unjustified true beliefs and justified false ones.[[5]](#footnote-5) Which one of these values, truth or justification, matter more to the belief’s overall value may well depend on its content and context. In defusing a bomb, having a true belief about which wire to pull seems to be all that matters, regardless of how one came to have the belief. But many have thought that knowledge requires that beliefs be justified in some sense and so anytime that knowledge, expertise, or something approaching certainty is called for, the belief’s being justified is what seems to matter most.

In Richard Feldman’s (2000) defense of evidentialism he takes it that that following one’s evidence is the “proper way to achieve something of epistemic value.”  But the epistemic value cannot be simply truth or knowledge given that, according to Feldman “A person who irrationally believes a lot of truths is not doing well epistemically. In contrast, a person who forms a lot of rational but false beliefs is doing well epistemically.” If not truth, then what epistemic value is evidentialism in service of? Feldman argues that is rationality; we want beliefs that *would* be true and provide us with knowledge in ideal conditions. Feldman’s principle of epistemic value is as follows: “When adopting (or maintaining) an attitude toward a proposition, *p*, a person maximizes epistemic value by adopting (or maintaining) a rational attitude toward *p*.” And it is rational to follow the evidence. Following the evidence will give us knowledge when knowledge is available; if you follow the evidence and other conditions hold, then you will get truth and knowledge.

So far, I have mentioned truth, justification, knowledge, and rationality. These are often called *epistemic* values. Some contrast *epistemic* justification or rationality with *practical* justification or rationality. Feldman, for example, refers to people doing well “epistemically” as “achieving epistemic excellence.” One of his main conclusions is that the epistemic “ought” is entirely distinct from the moral or practical. He contends that for each “ought” there is an associated value and we “ought, in the relevant sense, [to] do the thing that maximizes, or perhaps something that does well enough in achieving that kind the value.” So we *morally* ought to do what produces enough moral value, *prudentially* ought to do what produces enough prudential value, and *epistemically* ought to do what produces enough epistemic value. But if these “oughts” conflict, there is no way to adjudicate between them, no meaningful question about what I ought to do or believe all things considered. He says: “We’ve disambiguated ‘ought’ and we can’t put the various senses back together again.”

Similarly, Ernest Sosa distinguishes between beliefs that are *epistemic* and those that are not. Sosa allows that one can be motivated to believe for practical reasons and that, all things considered, it can be rational to do so. Still he thinks it makes sense to say that “a belief can be *epistemically irrational* though rational all things considered” (2010, 34), As an epistemologist, Sosa says he is interested in *epistemic* rationality and so says that he is interested in a particular kind of belief: “When we say that knowledge is apt belief, therefore, we must understand this as belief of a certain sort.  Only beliefs in the endeavor to attain truth will qualify.” (2010, 17)

But why are truth and knowledge valuable? To some the question may sound like asking why is goodness good or, perhaps, why is happiness good. There are some intrinsic goods where asking this question seems misguided. But given how initially implausible it seems that every true belief is valuable, when one thinks about trivial useless ones, or when one realizes that the mere accumulation of true beliefs does not seem valuable in itself, some account of the value of truth is called for. Michael Lynch recognized such an account was needed and has provided one, arguing that truth is intrinsically valuable and so any true belief will possess some value simply in virtue of its being true. I have discussed Lynch’s view at length elsewhere.[[6]](#footnote-6) I agree with much of what he says, in that he grounds the value of truth in the role it plays in a flourishing life. But I think reflecting on its role reveals that it not intrinsically valuable. What provides truth with its value is the role it plays in flourishing, its value *depends* on the practical value in which it is grounded. By tying epistemic value to the practical, broadly construed, we can make sense of why epistemic norms have the force that they do. I have still not seen an adequate defense of the idea that an autonomous epistemic domain can retain the kind of normative force that most theorists think epistemic norms possess.

But if contributing to flourishing[[7]](#footnote-7) is the non-derivative value, the one that ultimately provides truth with its value, then we have discovered another doxastic value. So besides asking whether the belief is true or whether the belief is justified (where justified is taken to mean roughly grounded in evidence) we can also ask does this belief contribute to flourishing? For example we ask this of Nozick’s belief about his children not being automata. It is important to note that most beliefs will do so *because* they are true or grounded in evidence. Again, following one’s evidence, in general, will lead to true beliefs and, in general, having true beliefs will allow for survival and flourishing. But if some beliefs that are integral to flourishing cannot be grounded in evidence and their truth-value remains indeterminate, this will not detract from their value. I will call this kind of doxastic value “practical.”

It is important, however, to distinguish this kind of broad practical value from a narrowly instrumental or prudential value. The value being identified is not one that has to do with a particular person’s interest. A particular belief supported by the evidence can be very painful. And holding on to a particular prejudiced belief may serve someone’s self-interest, but doing so requires violating rules that lead to true beliefs, or following rules that lead away from them. But the “interest” we have in truth is not one tied to particular people’s interests or particular beliefs. Rather, it is a “general interest.” We (and by “we” I mean all of us who have any goals at all) have a very strong interest in our beliefs generally being true. For this interest to be met requires developing a cognitive system that *generally* produces true beliefs. And so it is important that we are guided by rules of belief maintenance that, if everyone internalizes and follows, will lead to overall flourishing. Because truth is so important, the beliefs that are practically valuable regardless of their truth value must be ones that do not require one to violate or ignore the rules that tend to lead to truth.

In other work I have discussed a number of types of belief that may have this kind of practical doxastic value. Here I want to focus on what I call “meaning-making beliefs,” that is beliefs that are integral or foundational to providing coherence to our lives, whether or not we have any evidence of their truth. Reflection on such beliefs, I will argue, offers a way of responding to the skeptic.

1. A practical response to skepticism

Our belief that there is an actual world of external objects (and persons) is not a belief that is generated by any argument; we just find ourselves with it. And just a little reflection and exposure to standard skeptical arguments show that it is a belief that cannot be justified in any standard way. Belief in the external world, perhaps more than any other, is one required for coherence, and meaning making. [[8]](#footnote-8) It is not even clear if it is *possible* to follow the neutrality rule, and suspend judgment, regarding this belief which is what is often taken as the epistemically appropriate response when faced with an absence of evidence. Perhaps in moments of deep reflection or under the influence of powerful drugs, we can manage brief suspension of this belief. But those moments will likely induce anxiety and feelings of disassociation. We would not think of a mind lacking this belief as a healthy mind. One may take its universality and persistence as a sign that it is true. Indeed many of Hume’s contemporaries assumed that if “Nature” had seen fit to provide all humans with such a persistent belief, then it must be true. But Hume does not say this, and I think it would be problematic to assume that the persistence and seeming universality of belief were taken as a sign of its truth.

This is an example of a belief that is valuable whether or not it is evidentially based or whether or not we can know it. Some argue that the “external-world hypothesis” is a more probable explanation for our sense experience than are other possible hypotheses involving some kind of deception. Yet, it seems problematic to appeal to probability without already assuming the existence of an external world. Normally, when calculating probabilities we begin with our “priors,” that is our prior probability before we are considering new information or data, and these are based on previous experience, all assuming a world that is experienced. In this case, if we ask ourselves “how probable is it that there is an external world given our experience?” there is no prior appeal to that does not assume this world is what we experience. [[9]](#footnote-9)

I don’t have the space here to engage with some of the recent attempts to provide an “abductive” justification for this belief but if such responses succeed they do not detract from my argument. [[10]](#footnote-10) I claim that this belief has a practical justification whether or not it can be grounded in evidence or supported by inference to the best explanation. Nothing about my view depends on there being an absence of what is often called *epistemic* reasons for belief in the external world. But if there are no such reasons, I can still allow that this belief is justified.

What kind of response, then, does this view of the value of belief allow us to make to the skeptic, and how does it differ from those dogmatic responses I referred to earlier? As I mentioned, these responses avoid addressing the question of why it is permissible to maintain our belief in the external world, and other such “framework” beliefs even though they fail to meet regular standards used in doxastic evaluation. The practical response is not evasive or dismissive in this way. Like those abductivist responses that try to show our belief in the external world can be justified by inference to the best explanation, the practical response claims that the belief can be justified by appealing to its practical, rather than alethic value.

This may sound a lot like a response that appeals to entitlements. What is meant by entitlement varies from view to view. I take it some notions will clearly be associated with those dogmatist and externalist accounts which say I am entitled to hold certain beliefs if they are, for example, result from a reliable process even if I cannot access a way of revealing that they have so resulted. But the kind of Wittgensteinian entitlement view that Crispin Wright espouses might seem very close to what I am endorsing. One key difficultly that arises for Wright and others who are attracted to what is being called “hinge epistemology”[[11]](#footnote-11) is to describe the nature of the attitude that one has towards these “hinge” or framework or cornerstone propositions (if they are so). The worry is that if they are beliefs then they must be subject to the same kind of evidential/alethic norms as all other beliefs. And so other proposals are offered how to think of this attitude.

For Wright (2004) an entitlement is “a type of rational warrant whose possession does not require the existence of evidence in the broadest sense encompassing both *a priori* and empirical considerations for the truth of the warranted proposition.” And he says what I am entitled to do is “accept” these cornerstone propositions. He views “acceptance” as a genus of which belief is one species, but because he takes it (or at least concedes) that beliefs are controlled by evidence, our attitude towards those propositions to which we are entitled cannot be beliefs. He canvasses a number of ways of thinking about this attitude such that it can play a role in disarming the skeptic and concludes that such acceptance “is --- or has to involve *trust…*It is in the nature of trust that it gets by with little or no evidence. That is exactly how it contrasts with belief proper, and it is not *per se* irrational on account of the contrast. Entitlement is rational trust.” (194)

What is the difference between rational trust and non-rational trust? This is not a simple question. First, it is commonly taken in discussions of trust that only people, not objects or propositions, can be trusted. And part of what makes trust rational has to do with the evidence. If I know someone well and come to see that he can be counted on, keep his word, *etc*., these are evidential reasons to trust him. But trust does not only come about from a careful weighing of the evidence; at least some of the reasons for trusting are non-evidential. I trust you because you are my friend or because our relationship requires that I do, or because I love you. There is a difference, for example, between someone assessing the odds and deciding that it is worth betting on whether my friend will keep her word, and *my* trusting my friend to keep her word. [[12]](#footnote-12) And such trust doesn’t seem to be irrational, especially if one does not have evidential reasons *not* to trust.

What kinds of considerations can we point to in thinking about entitlement as rational trust? If we ask the question why is it rational to trust that there is an external world the kinds of considerations are quite similar to those that I am deeming “practical”; they need to be presupposed in the course of many inquiries, further “we are entitled to place trust in whatever (we have no evidence against and which) needs to be true if rational decision making is to be feasible and effective.” (198) Does it need to be true that there is an external world for me to be able to deliberate, act and inquire? I don’t think so, what matters is that I need to be committed to it being true for there to be coherence and continuity in my experience. If I were to ask Wright what evidence he has that it is *true* he would claim that part of what it means to say I have such an entitlement is that such a question is out of place. And now it seems we have returned to a kind a kind of dogmatic response. When Wittgenstein considers the question of whether I am justified or entitled to trust (or believe) these cornerstone propositions, and that perhaps I have practical reasons for doing so, he says:

So I am trying to say something that sounds like pragmatism.

Here I am being thwarted by a kind of *Weltanschauung* (*OC* 422).

Why is Wittgenstein reluctant to say that what he is saying *is* pragmatism? He seems to think pragmatism commits one to the idea that we have chosen our system because experience has shown us that it works best, a commitment he wants to avoid. There is no question of rational choice; its “outstanding success,” he says, is not a *ground* for our “game of judging” (*OC* 131). We do not come to accept, for example, the principle of induction, because we have discovered its outstanding success. That things turn out well with the principles we use, and that these help us to make sense of the world we experience, are not rational grounds. Even though these attitudes are not grounded in reason, Wittgenstein does not say they are *un*justified. He says that he conceives of the certainty we feel about our unquestioned assumptions “as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified, as it were, as something animal” (*OC* 359)

The practical response does not have to stand silent in light of such questions or appeal to obscure metaphors. Nor does one have to deny that the attitude one has to such propositions is belief. These are beliefs which we hold for very good practical reasons.

Susanna Rinard had recently defended a position she called “pragmatic skepticism.” In a series of papers, Rinard has argued for “thoroughgoing pragmatism,” the view that all reasons for belief are practical. She adopts a consesequentialist perspective which condones believing whatever will bring about the best consequences. Given this perspective, one can accept the evidential skeptic’s conclusion that we have no evidential justification for our ordinary beliefs without disastrous consequences:

The Pragmatic Skeptic is convinced by the Doubting Skeptic’s arguments that we lack good evidence for ordinary beliefs. However, the Pragmatic Skeptic holds that there are only practical reasons for belief… So, the Pragmatic Skeptic does not think it follows from Evidential Skepticism that we ought to give up our ordinary beliefs. On the contrary, they think we ought to retain these beliefs, because we are better off doing so.

Now in some ways this is an idea that is held in common among all the dogmatic responses that accept that we cannot provide non “question begging” justification or evidence for our justifying principles. Like the pragmatic skeptic, they seek to reconcile the acceptance of this conclusion without it having any effect on our ordinary practice. The key difference, I take it, is that the Moorean sees the idleness of skepticism as a reason to reject it while the Pragmatic skeptic never rejects the skeptical conclusion but “this doesn’t prevent them from engaging in ordinary epistemic linguistic behavior.”

While Rinard sees her view as departing from Hume’s in some important ways, one of his central conclusions is that one can accept skeptical conclusions without there being any worrisome practical consequences. After putting forth his skeptical arguments concerning the belief that the future will resemble the past he says, “My practice, you say, refutes my doubts. But you mistake the purport of my question. As an agent, I am quite satisfied in the point; but as a philosopher, who has some share of curiosity, I will not say scepticism, I want to learn the foundation of this inference.”(ECHU, Section 4)

And like Rinard, he thinks that accepting skeptical conclusions can lead to an open mindedness and tolerance. Rinard says:

When the Pragmatic Skeptic considers those with different views, they will see deep symmetries with their own position: both sets of beliefs are equally well supported by the evidence; neither is more rational than the other; neither constitutes knowledge; neither party is failing to believe as they, in the subjective sense, should. Consequently, the Pragmatic Skeptic may lack the contempt and scorn that often accompanies accusations of failing to believe as one should, or failing to believe in accordance with the evidence.

I have claimed that embracing a kind of pragmatism, the view that holds that there are some non-evidential reasons for belief, offers a way of responding to the skeptic rather than a way of embracing skepticism and not being worried about it. What is the difference? One difference, which I mentioned above, is that I do not need to conclude that the skeptic is right. I have yet to see a satisfying response which appeals only to evidential considerations but I do not need to accept the skeptic’s conclusion that there cannot be any. But my belief in the external world is justified regardless of whether such a response is forthcoming.

Second, Rinard’s pragmatic skeptic exhibits a tension in their doxastic lives, believing or failing to believe skeptical conclusions depending on the context. This is much the way many have characterized Hume, as an on-again-off again skeptic, convinced of skeptical conclusions when in the study but failing to believe them when out in the world.[[13]](#footnote-13) She says:

“…the Pragmatic Skeptic will exhibit systematic, ongoing diachronic inconsistency in their beliefs: when confronted with or reminded of the skeptical argument, they endorse Evidential Skepticism; but, at other times, they are disposed to believe things incompatible with it. They can predict that they will exhibit diachronic inconsistency of this kind and see nothing illegitimate or problematic about it.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

While Rinard argues that this tension is not problematic it is hard to square this vacillation with the idea that accepting skepticism can have positive value. For one to have a more “tempered appraisal of those with whom they disagree” the skeptical conclusions cannot be forgotten in the course of every say life. What leads the Humean skeptic to adopt a kind of modesty and humility which leads to one judging less harshly is not the conclusion that all ordinary beliefs lack evidence. Given certain principles that make our justificatory framework possible, some ordinary beliefs lack evidence and some do not. The humility arises rather from the recognition that the beliefs which make the whole justificatory framework possible are justified by practical, not evidential reasons. Why does this recognition lead to humility? I think it is because it forces us to accept that our intellectual capacities can only take us so far, and that the stability of our epistemic practices depends on our having something much more like what is often thought of as faith, namely belief without evidence. Here, then, we can see that the kind of practical response I offer has some links with William James’s view presented in his essay “The Will to Believe.” He there says, in response to a Clifford’s strong evidentialism which says that “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” that, in certain matters that cannot be decided on “intellectual grounds” that our “passional natures” must decide what to believe. He claims that we can be guided by fear of being wrong and choose not to believe or by the hope of gaining truth and choose to believe.

This section has been concerned with distinguishing my view from other pragmatic responses to skepticism; how then does my view differ from James’s? James actually says very little about skepticism or skeptical arguments. He takes it as a starting point of discussion that skeptical possibilities do not hold, and thinks this is an appropriate stance for an empiricist to take. The following quotation is the extent of his engagement with skepticism, and he spends a lot more time distinguishing his view from the absolutists:

It will be observed that for the purposes of this discussion we are on 'dogmatic' ground,—ground, I mean, which leaves systematic philosophical scepticism altogether out of account. The postulate that there is truth, and that it is the destiny of our minds to attain it, we are deliberately resolving to make, though the sceptic will not make it. We part company with him, therefore, absolutely, at this point. But the faith that truth exists, and that our minds can find it, may be held in two ways. We may talk of the *empiricist* way and of the *absolutist* way of believing in truth. The absolutists in this matter say that we not only can attain to knowing truth, but we can *know when* we have attained to knowing it; while the empiricists think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when…If we look at the history of opinions, we see that the empiricist tendency has largely prevailed in science, while in philosophy the absolutist tendency has had everything its own way.

His view that there is some freedom in what to believe when the evidence is silent, and the choice one makes depends on broadly practical concerns, is one that aligns with my view that some beliefs can be justified by appeal to their practical value. His concern, however, was not how to apply this view to skeptical worries as I have done here. [[15]](#footnote-15)

1. Objections
2. *Does this view make the value of truth too precarious or fragile?*

A worry about a view that does not allow that truth is intrinsically valuable is that it will condone pernicious doxastic practices which permit believing comforting falsehoods. The challenge to the pragmatist, namely one who thinks that there are some practical reasons for belief, is to explain what distinguishes pernicious practically based beliefs from valuable ones. [[16]](#footnote-16) I have already responded to this worry by distinguishing between a belief being in or against a particular person’s interest vs. the general interest we have in forming and maintaining beliefs that generally contribute to both individual and *collective* flourishing. Given that truth and knowledge are so valuable, engaging in practices that lead away from truth and knowledge is problematic in every sense. If one has evidence that one’s belief is false, and maintains the belief by deliberately ignoring that evidence, then one’s practical belief is not justified. The distinction is familiar in the ethical case. That a particular act would be good for a particular person does not settle whether it would be a good thing for that person to do.

In a sense, and somewhat ironically, my view has a lot in common with Clifford’s defense of strong evidentialism. Clifford says that the ship owner who ignores the evidence that the ship is not sea-worthy is blameworthy for not believing in accord with the evidence, even if the ship managed to sail without anyone being harmed. But Clifford is clear that believing this way is a moral fault, “Belief, that sacred faculty which prompts the decisions of our will, and knits into harmonious working all the compacted energies of our being, is ours not for ourselves, but for humanity.” For Cliffordian reasons we might have a moral reason to cultivate doxastic practices that get us truth and knowledge. But once one accepts that our system of epistemic justification is grounded in its practical value, then we can see that exceptions to evidentialist dictates are possible. When the evidence is silent or neutral, to believe rather than suspend, will not lead to the kind of belief-forming practices and habits that can undermine our collective societal needs.

1. *Have I exaggerated the importance of true beliefs? Do we really need them to flourish?*

While we certainly need *some* true beliefs to pursue our goals, some may question whether the truth is as central to their fulfillment as I have suggested. Don’t many people live successful and fulfilling lives despite having worldviews grounded in substantially false belief systems? As one illustration, consider the vast diversity of religious belief. Since religious beliefs vary so much and there is no consensus about which of these worldviews (if any) is correct, it follows that the majority of people have incorrect religious beliefs. The problem is that flourishing lives take many forms, and one may think it is clearly possible for some people to flourish even when the worldviews that they have based their lives upon are dominantly false. It may seem that truth is not as tightly connected to human flourishing as I have supposed.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Whether people can flourish with mostly false beliefs is an empirical question but it strikes me as highly implausible that one can have a successful and fulfilling life if most of one’s beliefs were false. Most of our true beliefs are mundane and unnoticed; if I step on the brakes my car will stop, if I eat breakfast I will stop being hungry etc. People’s political and religious beliefs can radically differ, but on these matters of fact they will agree. Now when it comes to moral beliefs the situation is more complicated. If one takes it that moral judgments can be true or false, then a plausible case can be made for the idea that one cannot live a successful and flourishing life with mostly false moral beliefs. For whatever your preferred moral theory, the rightness or wrongness of an action is tied to a value conducive to flourishing—either of humanity or rational agency. Living a life with mostly false moral beliefs will, almost by definition, not be a good one.

One must remember also that my view is not only about the role of truth in individual flourishing but that the value of truth is tied to the societal value it has. This recognition can also explain why it can be valuable to have seemingly useless true beliefs, like, for example, true beliefs about quantum mechanics. One may think beliefs like this do not contribute to individual or collective flourishing but are valuable nonetheless. Again, what is valuable is having individual cognitive systems guided by norms that lead to having true beliefs given that we collectively depend on and rely on each other in our navigating the world. And so having a true belief can never have disvalue, not even the true belief about the number of threads in the carpet. But one can imagine that the costs of coming to have this belief outweigh the beneficial role it plays in the collective corpus of society’s true beliefs. True beliefs about quantum mechanics, however, are likely tied to many other scientific truths, and investigation in this area will also likely support those virtuous habits and practices that do contribute to flourishing.

1. *Have I really shown there is no meaningful autonomous epistemic domain?*

I have argued that there is no plausible story to tell about the value of truth and knowledge that doesn’t connect it to practical and so if there were a world where true beliefs had no such value, then, in my view, a proposition being true would not count at all in its favor. This may seem to beg the question against the proponent that there is mere epistemic value and that it should be seen as akin to moral value. Would moral goodness cease to have value in a world where it had no practical value?

I have a number of responses to this sort of concern. First this kind of worry points to an issue I discussed earlier about the “practical” being conflated with the narrowly prudential. To say that there is a world where moral value is detached from the practical makes no sense the way I am using the term. Moral goodness is a practical value, and much of the practical value attached to having a system of doxastic practices which generally lead to truth is, can properly be called moral or ethical.

Second, I agree that, of course, one can carve out a particular, specified normative domain in all kinds of areas where the values and norms are specific to that area. Sartorial norms can tell one how one ought to dress, and gustatory norms can say that one crème brulée is better than another. Or any game one plays will dictate both whether a move is acceptable as well as whether it was a good one. But epistemic value and norms are supposed to differ from such “conventional” norms. They are norms that any rational agent should follow, not just one who *happens* to have an interest in knowledge. The point is that one *ought* to, as a rational agent, value knowledge, whereas valuing food or clothes, or chess is a choice; you are not flawed if you fail to follow or care about these norms. Further, it seems you are reproachable if you fail to believe in accordance with these epistemic norms.

Some people would like to say that you are reproachable from the epistemic point of view if you violate such norms even if we might say that sometimes doing so would be commendable *qua* agent or human. In criticizing my view, Scott Stapleford (2017, 553) pushes such a point:

Consider an analogy: There are norms governing healthy eating. One of these norms says that you should avoid eating foods containing high concentrations of refined sugar. So when you eat a piece of cake, you’re not doing what you ought to do by the norms of healthy eating: you’re not doing well as an *eater*. But maybe you’re doing well as a *human*. Surely we make exceptions on someone’s birthday, or when they’re feeling depressed, or want to mark a success. It’s not true to say that there is nothing wrong with eating birthday cake. There is something wrong with it. It’s not nutritious. But from a broader perspective, we do regard occasional cake eating as permissible. Same deal here: we sometimes do regard believing in the absence of evidence as, say, morally or prudentially acceptable. But there’s still *something* wrong with believing that way. It’s suboptimal from an *epistemic* point of view ( just as eating cake is suboptimal from a *nutritional* point of view).

Again, we can specify a critical domain that we call epistemic and specify certain standards of correctness in the circumscribed domain and then any belief which failed to meet the standard would be defective is some way. We can thus have standards of correctness that are purely descriptive much the way we can have standard of correctness relative to the domain of etiquette. According to the norms of etiquette, for example, I am required to use my fork furthest on the left from my dinner plate first, and according to the rules of the country club to wear a white shirt when playing tennis. Such requirements are entirely conventional and they are conditional on your “buying into” the normative domain that they generate. But the normativity associated with the epistemic is usually taken as more robust than this. Many take it that epistemic norms tell us what we ought to do, or what we are permitted or obligated to do, and help guide us when we are not sure what to do. Thought of this way, they are norms tied to agency. We cannot believe well while we fail to be good agents, or believe poorly while being good agents. Beliefs are one of the upshots of our agency.

1. *Beliefs cannot be based on practical reasons.*

I have said that my belief in the external world (and other meaning-making) belief can be based on practical reasons, and further that such reasons can justify these beliefs. The claim that there are no practical reasons for belief is one commonly made by theorists of reasons and belief. In thinking about different kinds of reasons, some will say there are those that pertain to belief (called epistemic or theoretical) and those pertaining to action (called practical), and that these are completely exclusive domains. When the claim that there are no practical reasons for belief is developed or defended, it is usually modified so that what is being denied is the possibility of a quite specific phenomenon. All will admit that practical considerations, in fact, can contribute causally to what one believes. Many will even say that such considerations can count as reasons for these subjects *to* believe and, again, such reasons may partially cause the beliefs. What they deny, however, is that these non-evidential reasons are reasons *for which* these subjects believe; beliefs, they say, cannot be *based* on such reasons.

In answering the question “Can beliefs be based on practical reasons?” [[18]](#footnote-18) it needs to be divided into two separate questions. The first is: Can one take oneself to believe for practical reasons? The most plausible characterizations of the basing relation do not rule this out. What is centrally involved in basing a belief on a reason is that one treats the relation as a justificatory one, that one *endorses* the connection between the reason and the belief. The further question is: Can this endorsement or representation be correct, proper or rational? Since many take the answer to the first question to be “No,” the second question never gets asked. My answer to the second question is also “yes”; one can distinguish between good and bad cases of believing for practical reasons just as one can distinguish between good and bad cases as believing for evidential ones. To make room for the idea that practical reasons can *justify,* however, requires de-linking doxastic justification from propositional.[[19]](#footnote-19) I have defended these two claims at length elsewhere. Here is an example that I take to be an example of a good practical reason for belief, taken from my own life:

One of my very best friends, Susan, recently died from an aggressive sarcoma. She approached her illness and dying with acceptance despite being one of the heathiest and most active people I have known. Susan was not religious, and did not believe in God. She was also highly intelligent and educated. She believed that when she died that some aspect of her being would still exist. Of course, people would tell her all the time about stories and dreams that provide evidence for such a belief. But none of these formed the basis of her belief; they are insufficient support and she would not have believed it if these were the only considerations in support. She believed it because it helped to mitigate the concern she had for the pain of her loved-ones. The reasons for which she believed it are broadly practical, connected to love and comfort rather than evidence and truth.

1. *Is my response really any less evasive than the “dogmatic” responses?*

One may wonder if my claim that we have good practical reasons to believe in the external world is just to change the subject. If epistemologists have been arguing over whether there is good *epistemic* reason to believe that there’s an external world, and I say that there is good *practical* reason to believe it, then it may seem I am answering a different question.

What I have been urging is that this sharp distinction between kinds of reasons for belief cannot be maintained when we are thinking about the question of what one ought to believe. Once epistemologists shift the focus away from the belief and what is needed for it to count as knowledge, and on to the agent, asking how ought one form and maintain one’s beliefs, then we have taken a step beyond the pure epistemic. If the realm of the epistemic is inextricably linked to the practical, then so-called epistemic reasons are actually practical ones as well. Questions about what I ought to believe are questions concerning *doxastic* norms. It has become common to equate the doxastic realm with the epistemic. I am an urging that this is an improper conflation; we cannot assume that epistemic norms (those relating to truth and knowledge) are the only ones that apply to belief.[[20]](#footnote-20)

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1. For an extremely helpful discussion of Moorean responses and how to make the response most plausible see Kelly (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bergman offers a response by distinguishing between questioned source contexts and unquestioned source contexts. If you question the trustworthiness of a particular source (e.g. perception) then to rely on this source to appease your doubts is problematically circular. But if a person who has no doubts at all about the trustworthiness of her sense perception – in fact, she has never before considered the proposition that her sense perception is reliable – comes to believe that her sense perception is reliable and then discovers that her belief was formed in a way that involved epistemic circularity, then this is not problematic because she “wasn’t looking for some independent verification of the reliability of her senses.” Ultimately Bergman looks to Reid and his view of “common sense” for explaining why we are justified in believing our first principles. Reid takes it that it is built into human nature that we find views that contradict our first principles absurd and, since he takes it, that God provided us with this “emotion of ridicule” then what we find absurd must be so. That people’s encounters with and reactions to skeptical arguments vary so widely belies this view.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While both ancient and early modern philosophers in the skeptical tradition differ in their claims and aims, it is significant that most contemporary responses to skepticism take something like Descartes’s first meditation to be the exemplar of the skeptical argument in need of defeat. But, of course Descartes is not a skeptic. I think it is important, when thinking about the nature and significance of skepticism to look to those who embrace skepticism. While one may attribute some of these stronger claims to the Pyrrhonians (as did Hume), Sextus would deny that he makes any such positive assertions. The skeptical arguments set forth in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* are given as tools to help the reader adopt a way of life free from agitation. I focus here on Hume since his views have been almost as influential on contemporary discussions as Descartes’s first meditation but he, unlike Descartes, identifies as a skeptic. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In (2005) I discuss Hume’s normative claims about beliefs and how they can be reconciled with his view of belief as essentially passive. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A notable exception is found in Littlejohn (2018, forthcoming). While this is a minority view among contemporary epistemologists, perhaps the view that one cannot be justified in having a false belief is, historically, more common. This is hard to assess because it is not clear what concept matches up with the contemporary notion of justification. One can be an infallibilist about knowledge, as Descartes was and still think holding beliefs that do not reach the level of certainly required for knowledge is “reasonable.” For many early modern philosophers “moral certainty” was seen as sufficient for belief; these are beliefs that are not reasonable to doubt but fall short of absolute certainty that admits, for example, of mathematical proof. *Op. cit*  Pasnau, especially chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Chapter 2 of (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I will expand on what is meant by flourishing when responding to objections below but, for my purposes, I do not need a theory of flourishing, or a list of conditions that need to be met for a life or a society to count as flourishing. One pre-condition for flourishing is survival and, quite plausibly, truth and knowledge, are needed to survive. For Aristotle a flourishing, or excellent, human life is one that succeeds in performing the distinctive human function of actively exercising reason excellently. We can eschew both Aristotle’s teleology and rationalism but still agree that a life where one is able to fully exercise one’s potential and capacities is more flourishing than one that does not. And a society that is structured in a way that allows its members to so fully exercise their potential is more flourishing than one that does not. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Very closely connected to the idea that there is an external world is that this world operates with a kind of regularity. I believe that if I close my eyes and open them again that my computer will still exist and, more generally, that what has happened in the past helps me predict what will happen in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. When developing an argument for why we are justified in believing that a belief system that retains long-term coherence would be one that also correctly describes reality, Lawrence Bonjour tries to develop an argument which reveals that the external world hypothesis is *a priori* more likely than any other hypothesis. When he first introduced this idea he admits philosophers are likely “to have qualms about” the idea of *a priori* probability. (1985, 181) We are just supposed to “see” that skeptical hypotheses are “antecedently less likely to be true than the correspondence hypothesis.” Of course this is how it seems given that we believe one and not the other. I am not sure if other’s qualms have been assuaged over the last forty years but I still cannot make sense of this idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a detailed discussion of these responses which concludes that most fail easily see Beebe (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For an overview of the current state hinge epistemology see Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock (2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Marusíć (2015), pp. 175-208 for a discussion of the difference between beliefs formed in the context of trust and those that are based only on the evidence. For further discussion of the nature of trust and when it is rational see Hawely (2014), Holton (1994) and Longworth (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In my (2004) argue against this interpretation of Hume’s skepticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rinard says this is only one version of the Pragmatic skeptic. It is also possible, she says, to think of such a character as believing “Evidential Skepticism at all times and in all circumstances, and so they always regard certain ordinary epistemic claims as false, though they sometimes see good reason to make them.” This version of the skeptic makes assertions for practical purposes but does not believe them. I don’t see how this version squares with what Rinard takes to be the main goal of the paper which is to apply pragmatism about reasons of belief to skepticism. What is interesting and contentious about her view is that it says we have practical reasons to *believe*. Many would agree that we have practical reasons to act in certain ways or to make certain assertions. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Some have tried to apply James’s response to skepticism about religious belief to skepticism about knowledge more generally. I think this is a mistake since James makes it clear that his argument for the permissibility of religious beliefs rests on assuming that truth and knowledge is attainable. For a discussion of possible Jamesian responses to skepticism and their weaknesses see Olsson (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This is the main topic of my discussion in Chapter 3 of my *Believing Against the Evidence,* and I discuss it further in (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Trevor Hedberg makes this point when criticizing my view here: <https://syndicate.network/symposia/philosophy/believing-against-the-evidence/> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In (2019) I answer this question in the affirmative. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The view that practical reasons cannot justify depends on thinking of reasoning as akin to arguments with premises and conclusions. But the idea that this is how best to think about the mental movements of reasoning is questionable. See my (2019) for further discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I am grateful for all the valuable feedback and comments I received when I presented earlier versions of this paper at The Ethics Working Group, University of Richmond (October, 2018), The Philosophy Department at Union College (October 2018), the COGITO Epistemology Group, University of Glasgow (November 2018) and at The Value of Truth conference Budapest, Hungary (November, 2018). I am also thankful for comments from anonymous referees of this journal. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)