

## Skepticism, Self-Knowledge and Responsibility

Dr. David Macarthur, University of Sydney

Modern skepticism can be usefully divided into two camps: the Cartesian and the Humean.<sup>1</sup> Cartesian skepticism is a matter of a theoretical doubt that has little or no practical import in our everyday lives. Its employment concerns whether or not we can achieve a special kind of certain knowledge – something Descartes calls “scientia”<sup>2</sup>—that is far removed from our everyday aims or standards of epistemic appraisal. Alternatively, Humean skepticism engages the ancient skeptical concern with whether we have good reason, or any reason at all, for our beliefs, including the common or garden beliefs that are presupposed in our ordinary practical affairs. On this traditional conception, philosophical doubt is a projection of everyday doubt and the lessons of the study are potentially lessons for the street.

In this paper I shall focus on the Humean strain of skepticism whose focus concerns whether we have adequate reasons for our beliefs. Henceforth when I speak of skepticism it is this variety of skepticism that I am primarily referring to.<sup>3</sup> I want to relate skepticism, so understood, to two kinds of self-knowledge. I shall argue that the failure of past solutions and dissolutions of skepticism to provide a satisfying response to the skeptic can be accounted for in terms of two stances that we can take towards our own

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<sup>1</sup> Conant (2004), alternatively, takes the important distinction to be that between Cartesian and Kantian skepticism on the ground that Descartes raises a doubt about whether we *actually* have knowledge of the external world, whereas Kant raises a doubt about whether such knowledge is *possible* at all. But this is not a robust distinction: Descartes' doubt blurs into Kant's.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Descartes (1985, Vol I, 10)

beliefs.<sup>4</sup> One is the stance from which we endorse beliefs and, more generally, make up our minds what to think on the basis of our sensitivity to reasons. I shall call this the deliberative stance. The other is the stance according to which we regard our beliefs, so far as possible, in the same way that others do, namely, as states of oneself that can be explained in purely theoretical (typically causal) terms. I shall call this the naturalistic stance.<sup>5</sup> A lesson of Hume's is that adopting the naturalistic stance on one's own beliefs plays a crucial role in motivating skepticism. I want to go a step further than Hume and explain why that is so. But my main aim is to explain why skepticism remains a threat even *after* we have acquired a philosophical understanding of it.

In order to set the stage for the discussion of these two kinds of self-knowledge we must first consider the *problem* of the problem of skepticism. I want to ask: what kind of problem is skepticism?

We are all familiar with the fact that in the history of philosophy there has been a long line of failed refutations of skepticism—a refutation being a non-question-begging answer to the skeptical conclusion. A refutation must demonstrate that one has the requisite knowledge or justification that has been called into question on the restricted basis of *only* those premises that the skeptic is happy to grant us. Repeated efforts have been made to refute skepticism by appeal to alleged certainties of reason or common sense, by

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<sup>3</sup> Although there is obviously some overlap with the more narrowly focused discussions of knowledge skepticism. Cf. Stroud (1984); Unger (1975).

<sup>4</sup> My account of the dual nature of self-knowledge and its internal tensions is indebted to Richard Moran's richly suggestive work, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (2001).

<sup>5</sup> Moran (2001, 3) speaks of this as "the purely theoretical or spectator's stance towards the self".

transcendental argument, inference to the best explanation, and appeal to externalism about content, to name only the most familiar attempts. Despite their ingenuity and interest, these refutations are uniformly disappointing since they seem to fall on one side or other of a dilemma: either they end up begging the skeptic's question without explaining why they are entitled to do so; or their rational reconstructions put a false cast on the ordinary concepts, say, of justification or knowledge that they are trying to defend.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, a different kind of response to skepticism, termed quietism, has gained popularity and with good reason. The quietist is not in the seemingly hopeless business of even attempting to refute or answer the skeptical conclusion. The basic insight of quietism is that it is a mistake to take the skeptical argument at face value—as the refuters do. The aim, rather, is to show that the skeptical problem is itself defective on the ground: either 1) that the skeptical problem rests on disputable (or unnatural) theoretical presuppositions (e.g. M. Williams (1991)); or 2) that the very posing of the “problem” is subtly incoherent (e.g. Putnam (1998)).

Although my sympathies lie more with the quietists, in this paper I want to suggest that *both* refuters and quietists share a common Cartesian presupposition about what a response to skepticism should achieve. A certain way of thinking about skepticism, the type of problem that it is, and the way we should respond to it, has gone missing in the Cartesian focus of many contemporary discussions of skepticism. It is to the thought of Hume that we must turn if we want to recover this way of thinking.

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<sup>6</sup> Here we find the motive for Cavell's conception of skepticism as embracing both traditional skeptical reflections *and* traditional counter-arguments (1979).

## The Idea of a Once-and-for-All (Dis)Solution

Our thinking about skepticism in general, and modern skepticism in particular, is very largely conditioned by our understanding of Descartes' attitude to skepticism as exemplified by the figure of the meditator. You will recall that by the end of his *Meditations*, the appeal to a non-deceiving God has laid the hyperbolic skeptical doubts of the First Meditation to rest. Looking back on the achievement of the *Meditations* Descartes boasted "I became the first philosopher ever to overturn the doubt of the skeptics" (1985, Vol. II, 367). Here Descartes expresses the philosophical desideratum that has shaped the vast majority of philosophical responses to skepticism ever since: namely, that what is wanted is that skepticism be *overturned*, which I take to mean that the threat posed by skepticism is to be *completely neutralized*.

This ideal of what a philosophical response to skepticism should aim for is one shared by refuters and quietists alike, even in spite of their differences. Whether one has adopted the ambitious aim of refuting the skeptical conclusion or the more modest task of showing that the skeptical problem is ill-conceived, the almost universally shared assumption is that skepticism is the kind of problem that can be *overturned once and for all*. In his reply to Hobbes, Descartes likens skepticism to a disease and his philosophy to a cure. So we might say that the common Cartesian assumption shaping our thinking about skepticism is that our aim in philosophy is to provide *a final cure*. Once philosophy has done its job we are supposed to have achieved a perspective from which the skeptical problem will not

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On this conception, skepticism is an attack on our ordinary concepts and their criteria of application.

seriously trouble us again. The longed-for goal is a reflective life completely free of skeptical torment.

Yet the very fact that no past attempt to bring such closure to skepticism has won widespread approval should at least give us pause. Surveying two thousand years of philosophizing, one is struck by the fact that skepticism was there at the beginning of philosophy and is with us still, despite the efforts of modern philosophers in the Cartesian mould. Given the remarkable fact that skepticism returns again and again phoenix-like after every one of its supposed burials, it is at the very least worth asking whether we should accept the Cartesian assumption that a once and for all solution, or dissolution, of skepticism is possible, or even desirable.

Perhaps the problem of skepticism is more like the problem of self-deception or weakness of the will than a problem that promises a theoretical resolution. Instead it may be the sort of problem that we can come to understand better without thinking that our aim in approaching the problematic phenomenon philosophically is to rid the world of it once and for all. Supposing that the causes of, say, self-deception lie deep in the human psyche then in coming to better understand self-deception one's aim need not involve any attempt to rid the world of self-deceivers. Self-deception, we might think, is not that kind of problem.

But why, then, should we follow Descartes in his thinking about the kind of problem skepticism is? Perhaps the interminability of skepticism is not something to be overcome but a fact about ourselves that we must learn to live with as best we can. That would be to see our inability to neutralize skepticism once and for all not as a failure, but as a datum requiring

explanation. On this alternative Humean approach, skepticism is a much deeper and more interesting phenomenon than Descartes and the philosophical tradition influenced by him have tended to suppose since, in a sense, skepticism is ineradicable. But why should that be so? To answer this question let us turn back to Hume.

### **The Interminability of Skepticism**

In a notorious passage of the *Treatise* Hume remarks:

This sceptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cur'd, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away, and sometimes may seem entirely free from it. 'Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. As the skeptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it always increases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it. Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy. (1978, 218)

It is clear from this passage that no system of thought, including his own naturalistic science of man, is thought of by Hume as an *answer* to the skeptic. The naturalist tenet that there is a natural or non-rational basis for, say, our belief in the external world is not to be thought of as refuting external world skepticism or showing that the skeptical problem of how we can rationally justify this belief is ill-conceived or in any other way defective. Hume's point is simply that our natural belief *replaces* skeptical doubt as a

matter of fact once we leave the study and its intense reflections. Naturalism is at best a partial, or temporary, cure for the skeptical malady. It does not remove the motivations that lead to the skeptical predicament.

Note, too, in contrast to Descartes, Hume's curious remark that skepticism "can never be radically cured". No sooner do we enter the study or return to our intense meditating upon the problem of the rational justification of this or any other belief than we inevitably find that there is no answer to give and we once again find ourselves in a "philosophical melancholy and delirium" (1978, 269).

That there is no radical cure for skepticism means that after philosophy has done its best to neutralize and accommodate itself to the skeptical threat, that threat remains a live option, something that follows inevitably upon a certain kind of reflection to which we are inevitably drawn. This is the feature of skepticism I am calling its *interminability*. But what kind of reflection leads to the malady of skepticism?

Here one might plausibly think that there is no general story to tell: different arguments lead to different versions of skepticism. For example, specific reflections about perception can lead to external world skepticism, whereas a certain way of thinking about bodily behavior can that lead to other minds skepticism; and so on. On this view there is no general structure underlying the different skepticisms—or, even, the different arguments for a given kind of skepticism<sup>7</sup>--and the best that philosophy can do is to address each separately.

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<sup>7</sup> What is commonly called "external world skepticism" can arise either from arguments attacking the claim to have *knowledge* (by appeal to the closure

I want to suggest, on the contrary, that there *is* a general story to tell linking these different versions of skepticism. But it is not that I want to claim that there is a common theoretical assumption or argument-structure underlying all the many and various skeptical arguments.<sup>8</sup> Rather, Hume's reflections on skepticism suggest that there is a general story to tell about the *conditions under which* we take these considerations seriously. Our capacity to take various skeptical considerations seriously depends upon certain basic and ineliminable features of the concept of belief and the equivocal character of our capacity for self-awareness. For these reasons, skepticism is a perennial possibility of the human subject. Let me explain.

### **Hume's New Science of the Mind**

At this point it is worth recalling Hume's general move in the history of philosophy. If we think of the natural sciences as attempting to explain phenomena according to causal explanations, ideally in terms of efficient causal laws, then Hume's move is to apply this causal-explanatory strategy to the human mind itself. A central tenet of naturalism is the idea that human beings do not stand over against nature but are part of it and, like other natural things, are wholly explicable in 'scientific' forms of understanding by

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principle, or a certainty condition, etc.), or from reflections attacking the claim that perception is ever reliable.

<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, I take it that many skeptical arguments trade on appeal to considerations that suggest an unbridgeable causal gap between our data or evidence (the effects: subjective experience, behaviour etc.) and the object(s) of skeptical concern (the causes: external world, mind etc). Skeptical scenarios, on this view, are alternative causal hypotheses designed to explain all of the 'data'. There is more discussion of skeptical scenarios as alternative causal hypotheses in Macarthur (2003) & (2004).

way of ‘scientific’ methods of investigation.<sup>9</sup> In the *Treatise* Hume articulates what he calls a new “science of Man” (1978, xv) according to which the method of studying the human mind is explicitly modeled on the scientific study of nature:

‘Tis no astonishing reflection to consider, that the application of experimental philosophy to moral subjects should come after that to natural (xvi)

Like the sciences of nature, Hume’s science of *human* nature “must be laid on experience and observation” (xvi). If the aim of the natural sciences is to limn the causal structure of the universe and discover its principles then, analogously, the aim of Hume’s new science of the mind is to discover universal causal principles or laws to account for our mental life, especially our beliefs and ideas.

Hume’s general idea is to apply a causal-explanatory project that has had great successes in explaining inanimate nature to the explanation of the mind itself; and his mind, in particular.

### **Two Perspectives on One’s Own Beliefs**

The clue to the interminability of skepticism is the fact that in adopting a naturalistic stance towards the contents of his own mind—especially his own beliefs—Hume is led to a radical skepticism about virtually everything, from which there seems to be no rational return. The question is: why does considering our own beliefs as natural phenomena lead to skepticism?

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<sup>9</sup> The scare quotes indicate that the introspective standpoint that Hume typically adopts would not now be recognized as scientific.

In order to approach this question it is worth recalling some central features of our concept of belief. I shall then consider the way in which these features bear on the skeptic's 1<sup>st</sup>-person reflection on his own beliefs.

Consider my belief that Caesar died in 44 BC. To believe this is, at a minimum, for me to be committed to its truth. We can go further and say that my belief that Caesar died in 44 BC is my commitment to the fact that Caesar died at that time on the basis of relevant considerations (e.g. documentary and artefactual evidence). It is to take the proposition "Caesar died in 44 BC" to represent the way things are, and so, being prepared to act on the basis of the truth of this proposition. It is to hold that the weight of the evidence speaks in its favor, or at least not against it, and that, to some extent, one is prepared to rationally defend the claim if it is challenged. We can sum up this aspect of belief by saying that belief is a *reason-sensitive commitment*.

It is because beliefs are sensitive to reasons that we can be held *responsible* for them. The relevant sense of responsibility crucially depends on our being epistemic agents, a form of rational agency that is reflected in cognitive activities such as weighing evidence, replying to criticism, forming conclusions and, in general, making up our minds what to think. We are open to criticism for the beliefs we hold and the way in which they are or are not supported by good reasons. We can be blamed for holding beliefs too firmly in the face of reasonable doubts such as evidence of their falsity or insufficient evidence of their truth. Sometimes we speak of individual beliefs as fanatical or dogmatic; on other occasions, we characterize believers in this way, meaning that they have a tendency to acquire fanatical or dogmatic beliefs. We can also be criticized for acquiring or giving up beliefs too readily, e.g.,

accepting another's opinion more because of their personal charm than any plausibility their opinions might have. The epistemic sin here is that of gullibility. And we can be too cautious or hesitant in our believing, or a fence-sitter unable to make up one's mind. And no doubt we can be criticized, qua believers, on other grounds as well.

These criticisms of our beliefs and of our habits of believing presuppose that there is a stance from which one can avow or endorse one's beliefs and decide what to believe in light of the available reasons. This is what I am calling the deliberative stance. To be a believer—in the full sense in which it applies to human beings—is to have the capacity to adopt the deliberative stance towards one's own beliefs. Of course, I do not mean to imply that all beliefs are products of deliberation. Far from it. But I do want to suggest that it is on the basis of this form of self-awareness that one identifies with one's beliefs, regarding them as expressions of one's own commitment to the truth of their contents. This stance is *essentially* 1<sup>st</sup>-personal since it is not a stance I can adopt to another's beliefs. From this perspective, my beliefs are normative attitudes that I identify with. They are what constitute my world-view, how I take things to be, where this is understood to involve a sensitivity to the considerations in favor of them. They express my sense of what is the case in light of the available reasons for and against. In general, then, it is from the deliberative stance that one comes to be aware of doxastic commitments for which one is responsible or criticizable.

However, it is important to see that in addition to the deliberative stance, we can also adopt a naturalistic stance towards our own beliefs, which is, to some extent, in tension with it. By the naturalistic stance I intend, in the

first instance, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-person stance towards oneself;<sup>10</sup> however, in the context of skepticism, it is better thought of as a matter of treating 1<sup>st</sup>-person access to one's beliefs on the model of 3<sup>rd</sup>-person awareness. From the naturalistic stance, the goings-on in our own minds are treated as mere natural happenings akin to any other natural occurrence in the world, say, the movements of leaves in a nearby tree. Up to a point it is possible to think of facts about one's own mental life as no different in kind than any natural facts in the natural world except that one is in a special position to witness them.

Although 1<sup>st</sup>-personal, this way of thinking about introspection is obviously modeled on the epistemology of observation, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-personal stance we enjoy towards other people or physical things in the environment. From this perspective the relation that one takes to one's own beliefs is supposed to be not importantly different from the relation one stands to another's beliefs, or that another stands in towards one's own. It is not an essentially 1<sup>st</sup>-person stance, unlike the deliberative stance from which one *determines* what one to believe, a relation one does not stand in to anyone else's beliefs.

It is from the naturalistic stance that there is a tendency to objectify beliefs as causally produced inner objects of a kind of inner perception.<sup>11</sup> Hume, of course, falls victim to precisely this tendency in likening the mind to a theatre and in speaking of mental states as if they were characters in a play that one alone is in a position to watch:

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<sup>10</sup> Treating one's own mental life from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-person stance involves, e.g., ascribing beliefs to oneself on the basis of one's appearance in a mirror, or under a description one does not recognize is about oneself, or on the basis of Freudian psychoanalytic or empirical psychological theory.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Armstrong (1968).

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. (1978, 253)

Hume treats beliefs and self-knowledge of them on the model of the perception of physical objects. A 3<sup>rd</sup>-person phenomenon is transposed into a mental interior. The important point is that when one adopts a naturalistic stance towards oneself one sees one's own beliefs in a detached way as mere states of oneself to which one is a private spectator, one loses the sense of them as having any normative significance, as states of oneself with which one identifies. The naturalistic stance involves a withdrawal from one's sense of being committed to the truth of the content of one's beliefs. It is almost as if we are capable of reporting what our beliefs are without taking any stand on what they are about.

At the limit that, of course, is incoherent. I cannot report that I believe that I am wearing a blue shirt without at the same time being committed to the truth that this is so. Ordinarily, if I consider the question whether I believe that I am wearing a blue shirt then I do not turn my attention inwards and consider my state of mind; rather, I look outward at the world—in this case, at my shirt—or evidence pertaining to it. This is what philosophers call the “transparency” of belief.<sup>12</sup> I cannot identify my belief that I am wearing a blue shirt independently of taking a stand on this worldly fact about my clothes.

This reveals the priority of the deliberative relative to the naturalistic stance,

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<sup>12</sup> Edgley (1969). The immediacy of ordinary self-knowledge, the fact that I do not require any evidence about myself to know (say) that I believe that it is raining, depends upon the fact that I determine what to believe about the proposition “It is raining” on the basis of rational considerations pertaining to

namely, that one would not so much as *have* a belief to adopt any stance towards, unless one had already committed oneself to it, that is, had already made up one's mind about the matter.

However, from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-personal or naturalistic stance, beliefs are attributed to me on the basis of evidence, so that identifying my belief that I am wearing a blue shirt may come to seem something independent of whether I am wearing a blue shirt or not.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, evidence for psychological states of a subject who happens to be me is one thing and objective facts about my clothing is another. So in adopting the naturalistic stance on my own belief I treat the belief in isolation from the state of the world on which its truth depends.

It should be clear that although both stances towards one's beliefs are available, the naturalistic stance of detachment is in tension with the deliberative stance of commitment and that adopting the naturalistic stance towards one's beliefs has its limits. For to believe that *p* at all requires that one is *committed* to the truth of *p*, a commitment that is typically expressed in speech and action. But it is important to see that in so far as one does adopt the naturalistic perspective it will seem, to some extent at least, as if one's beliefs no longer stand to oneself as commitments to the truth of something beyond themselves. As natural objects of our introspective gaze, beliefs become disengaged from the believer and from their claim to truth and

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the weather outside and not about the subject of belief who happens to be myself (cf. Moran (2001)).

<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, despite the difference in the basis and authority between the 1<sup>st</sup>-person case of my knowing what I believe and the 3<sup>rd</sup>-person case of your knowing what I believe, it is the very same state of belief that I express and you ascribe to me. I can express it by my asserting, say, "I believe that the

reasonableness. They come to be assimilated to mere states of oneself akin to, say, having indigestion or a pain in one's foot.<sup>14</sup>

Such an understanding of one's own beliefs is unstable, however. The naturalistic stance could not be the only, nor the primary, stance we adopt towards our beliefs, because it is the deliberative stance that is essentially tied up with being a believer in the first place. It is essential to our conception of ourselves as rational agents that we can regard at least *some* of our beliefs as our own and as expressive of our rational freedom, our capacity to *make up our minds* about what to think on the basis on our sense of the relevant considerations. That is not to say that we must see all, or even most, of our beliefs as the products of deliberation. It is rather to see that there are limits in the adoption of a naturalistic stance on one's own beliefs: to regard a belief of one's own as nothing more than a natural object is to lose the sense of being committed to the truth of its content and hence to its being a belief at all.

### **The Two Stances and the Avoidance of Responsibility**

I want to suggest that it is in virtue of shifting between these two perspectives towards one's own beliefs in 1<sup>st</sup>-person reflection that the skeptical considerations lead to a state of skepticism. In the imaginative exercise of engaging with the skeptic, at some point we find ourselves being asked to defend beliefs for which we have no adequate reasons. And then the question is why we ought to remain committed to beliefs that we cannot provide reasons for. Of course, it is characteristic of skeptical arguments that

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shirt is blue" and you can report it by your ascribing "David believes that the shirt is blue".

the commitments for which we seem unable to provide reasons are basic in our system of belief. Examples include:

- that perception can provide at least prima facie reason for beliefs about the external world
- that behaviour can provide at least prima facie reason for beliefs about other minds
- that memory can provide at least prima facie reason for beliefs about the past

Our ordinary conception of experience, action, and memory, simply presupposes these basic epistemic commitments.<sup>15</sup> That is why we are unable to provide any non-question-begging, or independent, reasons for them.<sup>16</sup>

In skeptical reasoning the pursuit of justifying reasons from the deliberative stance reaches a dead-end at basic epistemic beliefs. The skeptic's insight is that there is no independent reason to accept these beliefs. Now, on its own, this discovery need *not* lead us to a skeptical crisis. Surely we *could* go on accepting these commitments even in the knowledge that we have no satisfying reasons for them. Hume says that is, in fact, what we do once we leave the study.<sup>17</sup> But what Hume does not explain is why this lack of

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<sup>14</sup> This feature of the naturalistic stance helps explain Hume's remarkable claim "that belief is nothing but a peculiar feeling" (1978, 624).

<sup>15</sup> Plausibly, they are among the beliefs that Wittgenstein (1969) calls "hinge propositions".

<sup>16</sup> If we retreat to the position from which experiences are subjectivized or behaviour is robbed of any connection with expression then it is no wonder that we sense that an epistemic gap has opened up that we cannot bridge. We cannot get back from subjective experience to the world or from mere behavior to other minds.

<sup>17</sup> At this point Hume appeals to human nature as a non-rational source for our belief that also explains its persistence in the face of skeptical challenge.

reasons is unstable, always liable to become a crisis in which our commitment is threatened or lost?

I want to suggest that we can answer this question by considering our capacity to vacillate between two stances to these (or any) beliefs in 1<sup>st</sup>-person reflection. In the skeptical search for justification, the so-called 'infinite regress of justification' is a myth. As we all know, reasons inevitably come to an end. Since we can find no non-question-begging reason to support our basic epistemic beliefs from the deliberative stance we tend to shift to the naturalistic stance to discover their causal origin. But, this is precisely a stance from which we lose any sense of the normative force of these beliefs, of their status as commitments of ours to things being thus and so that we avow or endorse. It is this movement of thought—this ambivalence of self-knowledge—that turns our lack of reasons into a serious problem. It is as if *only* reasons could now recover the missing commitment but more reasons would not solve the problem. The naturalistic perspective leads to a detachment that—given the centrality of the beliefs in question—strikes us as a calamity.<sup>18</sup> As Hume reports, "the skeptical doubt... always increases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it" (1978, 218).

Why, then, do we not stop at the realization that our epistemic practices presuppose basic epistemic presuppositions that we can provide no

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Another direction for an explanation might appeal to rational faith, although that seems to rename the problem rather than solve it.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to distinguish the 'bracketing' or 'stepping back' from one's commitments that is a feature of deliberation from the detachment (exploited by skepticism) that is associated with the naturalistic stance. The former bracketing is fully compatible with continued commitment whereas the latter detachment is in tension with it.

reason for or, at least, no reason that does not already presuppose them? Or, rather, why do we tend to adopt the naturalistic stance of detachment from which retaining our commitments seems to depend upon reasons that we cannot find? Here, borrowing a suggestion from Wittgenstein, one might say that it is because we are inveterate explainers. Where we run out of explanations in one direction we'll go searching for them in another. Such an account may well form part of the skeptic's self-understanding, as if the skeptic is driven to his conclusion by scrupulous attention to the demands of theoretical inquiry. But I think there is a deeper motivation: the perennial human tendency to avoid or disown responsibility.

In order to go some way towards justifying this claim, I want to reconceive skepticism in terms of the notion of epistemic responsibility. Let me start by recalling what sense of justification is relevant to skepticism. In one sense, "justification" refers *to the reliability of the process whereby one came to hold the belief*. To be justified in this sense is for it to be objectively likely that one's belief is true (relative to some standard of objective likelihood). The second sense of the term "justification" refers *to one's epistemic entitlement to one's belief*, the question whether one's way of forming and continuing to hold a belief is beyond reproach. Being justified on this understanding is for one to be epistemically blameless in believing as one does. It is this second sense, justification as entitlement, that is relevant to skepticism. The skeptic, both ancient and modern, asks whether we are *entitled* to our beliefs or, in other words, whether we have an *epistemic right* to believe them.

Ancient skeptics, for example, attempted to cultivate the skills needed to show that for any given proposition *p*, the reasons one has in favor of *p* are

no better or worse than the reasons one has in favour of not-p, so that we come to see that we are not entitled to the belief that p.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, we suspend judgment about the question whether p. Ancient skepticism was a *practical* philosophy teaching not doctrine but a way of life: a life of tranquility, free from argument and dispute. Ancient skeptics report (and sometimes, inconsistently, dogmatically advertise) that suspension of belief leads to tranquility—something that seems hard to accept until one realizes that this suspension is not fully global but *only* concerns reason-based belief (“dogmas”). Beliefs ‘forced’ upon one by one’s senses, by sensations, or by one’s upbringing (ethical, legal, professional) are not subject to skeptical suspension. (See Sextus, 1994).

Similarly, what is at stake in modern skepticism is *entitlement to believe*. On a superficial understanding, the modern skeptic is purely theoretically driven, a kind of disappointed rationalist. Like the rationalist, the skeptic thinks that in order to earn one’s entitlement to certain basic epistemic beliefs that seem to be presupposed by one’s system of belief one *must* have appropriate reasons. Unlike the rationalist, however, the skeptic correctly sees that we do not have any independent reasons of the sort required.

But the skeptical demonstration that we lack reasons for such beliefs does *not* show that we are not entitled to believe them. For why should we accept the rationalist presupposition that earning entitlement is always a matter of providing sufficient reason? Ordinarily, earning entitlement to a belief is *sometimes* a matter of having an appropriate reason and *sometimes*

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<sup>19</sup> One formal strategy they employed was to appeal to the predicament known as Agrippa’s Trilemma in which the infinite regress of reasons for

not. In our epistemic practices there is a class of basic epistemic entitlements that one is entitled to simply by virtue of one's status as an epistemic agent, that is, by being a competent member of a community of reason-givers and –takers.<sup>20</sup> One is simply entitled without reason to believe that, say, perception is a source of prima facie reasons to believe things about the external world, or to believe that behaviour is a source of prima facie reasons to believe things about other minds. These entitlements are part and parcel of being a member of a community of rational believers.

It is important to see that a condition of entitlement to our beliefs is that we take *responsibility* for them as commitments of ours. The relevant notion of epistemic responsibility is not a matter of free choice and implies no voluntarism about belief.<sup>21</sup> What it requires is that one is properly criticizable for one's beliefs and, to some extent, for being taken to know when and how to defend beliefs against reasonable criticism. If not having reasons for basic epistemic commitments is not, by itself, enough to lose one's sense of commitment, what explains this phenomenon? What one requires, I suggest, is a shift to the naturalistic stance on one's beliefs, a movement that is motivated by the desire to avoid one's epistemic responsibilities. Skepticism is a refusal to accept the epistemic responsibilities that inevitably come with being a believer.

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reasons is only stopped by viciously circular reasoning or an ad hoc assumption.

<sup>20</sup> On a fuller account, one might see these as contextually sensitive default entitlements that are defeasible under certain circumstances. Cf. M. Williams (2000).

<sup>21</sup> The connection between epistemic responsibility and voluntarism is assumed by, e.g., Alston (1988).

The skeptical shift from the deliberative to the naturalistic stance where reasons have come to an end—which involves both a loss of commitment to belief and a loss of the responsibility that goes with it—is not required by a scrupulous attention to the demands of epistemic responsibility but is, on the contrary, an *avoidance* of epistemic responsibility. What is presented as a surprising discovery producing a state of melancholy and delirium, can be seen instead as a product of willful intention, a matter of avoiding responsibility for our epistemic situation as finite creatures. Here, too, modern skepticism connects with a dominant theme of ancient skepticism: as Burnyeat puts it, “the skeptic... is withdrawing to the safety of a position not open to challenge or inquiry” (1983, 128)

On the present view, then, skepticism is not simply the result of a demand for reasons as the source of our entitlement to believe, as many seem to think. The suggestion is that where the skeptical demand for reasons ends in beliefs for which we have no non-question-begging reasons and which are apparently crucial to our ordinary justificatory practices, then our capacity to adopt a naturalistic stance of disengagement from such beliefs is, ultimately, responsible for our sense of a skeptical crisis. Why? Because otherwise there would be the option of continuing to believe (or be committed to) what we discover we have insufficient or no reason to believe. Indeed, that attitude seems to be quite compatible with ordinary epistemic responsibility. The naturalistic stance explains the difference between commitment without reason and our sense of commitment lost.

It is notorious that the skeptical loss of commitment is inherently unstable. Upon leaving the study and entering once more into one’s practical

affairs, the skeptical considerations can strike one as, in Hume's phrase, "cold, strain'd and ridiculous" (1978, 269). The skeptical state of suspension is short-lived because no sooner do we leave the study than we find ourselves returning from the suspended judgments of our doubtful frame of mind to the commitments and responsibilities implicit in our practical lives. Shifting between the two kinds of self-knowledge explains both the skeptical sense of commitment lost—which we mistakenly put down to a lack of reasons—and the temporary nature of this malady.

### **Nagel on Skepticism**

It is worth comparing this account of skepticism to that of Nagel (1979, ch. 2; 1986, ch. 5). He, too, shares the idea of skepticism as arising from a shift between two essential and ineliminable epistemic perspectives we can adopt to our epistemic practices. There is a 'nebula's eye view,' or a 'view from nowhere,' from which we regard ourselves and our whole system of justification and criticism from an external, detached standpoint. From that perspective our justifications seem arbitrary and cannot be further justified without circularity. But from the everyday perspective of practical engagement we commit ourselves, once more, to our beliefs even in spite of the doubts that we cannot answer from the God's eye view. Nagel thus speaks of the human condition as one fated to a certain kind of double vision:

Double vision is the fate of creatures with a glimpse of the view *sub specie aeternitatis*. When we view ourselves from outside, a naturalistic picture of how we work seems unavoidable. It is clear that our beliefs arise from certain dispositions and experiences

which, so far as we know, don't guarantee their truth and are compatible with radical error. The trouble is that we can't fully take on the skepticism that this entails, because we can't cure our appetite for belief, and we can't take on this attitude toward our own beliefs whilst we're having them. (1986, 88)

Nagel's view is analogous to that defended in the present paper in so far as it traces skepticism to our tendency to vacillate between two stances towards ourselves where the fundamental question is a first-personal one about what to believe. But Nagel supposes that skepticism arises simply from an awareness that our epistemic practices rest on unarguable presuppositions.<sup>22</sup>

I have wanted to go beyond this standard explanation—which implausibly assumes that all commitments must be argued for—by claiming that the skeptical conclusion is best understood in terms of the human tendency to disavow responsibility even though it operates under the guise of doing just the opposite i.e. being epistemically scrupulous, careful, fastidious.

Nevertheless, Nagel shows rare insight in seeing that an explanation of the tendency to skepticism is one thing, whereas the final eradication of skepticism is quite another. While we can have the first, there is no hope of the second. The temptation towards skepticism remains even in spite of our attaining a philosophical understanding of it.

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<sup>22</sup> Although he does not carefully distinguish the Cartesian and Humean forms of skepticism, I read Nagel (1986, ch. v) as providing a distinct motivation for Cartesian skepticism, namely, an implicit realism built into our concept of (objective) knowledge.

## Naturalism and Skepticism

On a first reading, Nagel appears to suppose that reflection from the naturalistic stance inevitably leads to skepticism. On the contrary, it is important to see that a *purely* naturalistic inquiry into one's beliefs does not engender skepticism since in going straight to this stance the skeptical question does not arise.<sup>23</sup> Skepticism arises from the perspective of rational deliberation on one's entitlement to believe. Naturalistic inquiry, consistently pursued, simply bypasses skepticism.<sup>24</sup>

But perhaps Nagel is better read as following Hume in holding that the discoveries and conceptions arising from the naturalistic perspective provide materials that play into the hands of the skeptic when he considers the question of entitlement from the deliberative stance. Regarded from the naturalistic stance, beliefs come to be thought of as causally produced objects of introspection to which we seem to bear no commitment.<sup>25</sup> Skeptical scenarios exploit this conception by providing alternative causal hypotheses to explain how our beliefs are compatible with global error. So naturalism naturally gives rise to skepticism where this is understood as a matter of shifting back and forth between the two kinds of self-knowledge.

What of Hume's own "naturalistic response" to skepticism according to which there is a non-rational basis for our basic beliefs such as that there is

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<sup>23</sup> Here it is taken for granted that one has beliefs, hence that one has made up one's mind on various matters.

<sup>24</sup> Quine provides a good example of this naturalistically based avoidance of skepticism. See, e.g., Quine (1981).

<sup>25</sup> That is, our ordinary concept of belief is apt to undergo a subtle distortion in being considered from the naturalistic point of view. Ordinarily we think of beliefs as causally efficacious states of a person that intrinsically involve a commitment to truth. (One might think of the naturalistic conception of mental

an external world? Strawson has argued that although this response does not answer or refute the skeptic, it does show that arguing with the skeptic is idle since we will have the relevant belief no matter what.<sup>26</sup> A feature of this response is that since basic beliefs arise from, and are sustained by, natural forces quite independently of any reasons that might be brought to bear, we cannot be held responsible for having them. So naturalism implies that we are not responsible for our basic beliefs. Hume's naturalistic response is, then, not just something that provides material that give rise to skepticism, but is itself a form of skepticism.

Understanding the skeptical problematic is ultimately a matter of understanding the indefinitely many ways in which we avoid or disown the responsibility that inevitably comes with being a rational agent in the world. The lesson of naturalism is that we cannot treat our own beliefs as nothing more than natural items in the world to which we bear a merely epistemic relation (say, of inner awareness), since that would leave out of account what makes my beliefs mine, something for which I am accountable. Here modern skepticism reconnects with another feature of ancient skepticism, its ethical orientation.

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states as the "first step... in the conjuring trick" that leads to the mind-body problem. See Wittgenstein (1958, #308).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Strawson (1985). A "response" to skepticism, as I am using the term, is not to be equated with an "answer" or "refutation" of skepticism.

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