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Skepticism as Epistemic Naturalization

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"If a road is leading us to a precipice, we do not drive ourselves over the precipice because there is a road leading to it; rather, we leave the road because of the precipice" – Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*

In this paper I will argue that the skeptical projects of Pyrrhonism and David Hume share a common target, which they attack using a shared method. That target is a broad theoretical structure that is comprised of three central metaphysical and epistemological points. These are the existence of an external world, the existence of a set of epistemic norms that determine a proposition's logical relationship to that world, and a definition of truth as the state of a proposition that meets those epistemic norms, points which I will herein refer to collectively as "realism". These points together form a picture of human knowledge which relies on a "strong" notion of truth in which the veridicality of a proposition is guaranteed or made probable by its meeting a set of epistemic norms in a process which constitutes "justification". Both Sextus Empiricus and David Hume aim to dispose of all three of these points, and do so by explicitly questioning the conceptual coherence and empirical adequacy of each of them. In examining their approaches, I will focus on their shared treatment of the problem of induction as the argument which is most damaging to the cogency of the realist position and as a significant common thread underlying an overall project of skeptical empiricism. The consequences of the problem of induction for both of these writers are similar: the realist conception of truth is sacrificed as incoherent, belief is deflated from a commitment to a proposition's being veridical to a proposition's being cognized with a particular behavioural quality, and the "external world" is disposed of as a nonsensical concept barred from candidacy in establishing the truth or falsity of a proposition. Ultimately these criticisms position realism as entailing an *epistemic error theory*, wherein every proposition aspires to veridicality

and, due to the conceptual vacuity of an "external world", is necessarily false. To avoid arriving at such a theory as a natural endpoint for epistemology I will look at Michael Williams' contextualism as an example of an epistemological theory which effectively elucidates the consequences of Hume's philosophy of mind by incorporating Hume's disposal of metaphysical and epistemological realism and the consequentially deflated concepts of truth, belief, and justification, which that philosophy of mind entails. The centrepiece of the relationship between the philosophical standpoints of these writers is a shared conceptual deflation of truth: contextualism's use of a deflated account of truth mirrors that of both Pyrrhonian assent and Hume's phenomenological differentiation between belief and idea.

Sextus Empiricus, as his name evinces, belonged to the empiric school of Greek medicine. His book *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is styled as an epistemological extension of the medical philosophy of that school and of the Methodic school, both of which rejected treatment on the basis of "hidden causes" and the latter of which rejected the need for an experiential "justification" of treatments. The project of Pyrrhonism has a very explicit, if immediately counter-intuitive, goal: to induce *ataraxia* (tranquility) in the reader or interlocutor. Tranquility is said to follow "as a shadow follows a body" from the recognition of the universal equipollence of claims to propositional truth or falsity and the *epoche* (suspension of judgment) which such a recognition produces. The goal of Pyrrhonism is thus not, as Williams charges, to "represent working practices as unworkable"[1]. Instead, it is to humble the concept of belief to the point where it no longer entails a commitment to the metaphysical truth of a proposition. Pyyrhonism accomplishes this by attacking a higher standard for belief in which belief entails commitment to the assertion of some external state of epistemically-privileged "real" affairs by demonstrating that such a standard is not reflected by everyday epistemic phenomenology.

The resultant deflated notion of belief is described by Sextus variously as "acquiescence to appearance" and "conformity with traditional customs…and our own feelings".[2] Suspension of judgment

[1] Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 154.
[2] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, edit. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

specifically entails suspending judgment as to the *essential nature of things*; thus, Sextus avoids charges of self-consumption by explaining that skeptics maintain their position while refraining from passing judgment on its metaphysical truth or falsity: "Thus, if people who hold beliefs posit as real the things they hold beliefs about, while Skeptics utter their own phrases in such a way that they are implicitly cancelled by themselves, then they cannot be said to hold beliefs in uttering them."[3] When using a definition of truth as the logical correspondence between a proposition and the external state of affairs that it denotes, and a definition of belief as committal to the truth of a proposition in the aforementioned sense, the skeptic cannot be said to hold beliefs. Upon disposing of the realist definition of truth, all that is left of "belief" is "acquiescing to appearance", which is what the Pyrrhonian takes themselves to be doing in writing a skeptical treatise. Tranquility is entailed by the recognition that a realist conception of truth is both psychologically untenable and at odds with common epistemic practice: that is, that an aspiration to metaphysical truth is an obviously unnecessary headache. This recognition is in turn entailed by the recognition of the universal equipollence of truth-claims when placed under the epistemic standards produced by realism. A commitment to a view so starkly at odds with common epistemic practice, which aims to intelligently adjudicate between truth claims, will inevitably leave one torn between the need to differentiate between the epistemic privilege of contradictory truth-claims and their universal equipollence under a standard of truth which relies on a conceptually inaccessible external world. Sextus thus offers universal suspension of metaphysical judgment as the most expedient solution.

Focusing on the Pyrrhonian's goal of inducing tranquility is important for understanding skeptical methodology. Upon defining belief as "acquiescence" the alternative realist definition is differentiated not only by its entailing commitment to the metaphysical truth of a statement, but by the psychological process which the commitment amounts to: namely, an anxiety-inducing need for a proposition to meet an unreachable standard of truth. The skeptical modes are intended to emphasize what a hopelessly unrealizable exercise in meaningless self-distress this is by demonstrating how asymmetrical the realist

[3] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 7

standard of truth is with common epistemic practice. It is the intractable tension between "external objects" and the propositions we purport to form about them that the Pyrrhonian argues is both symptomatic of the incoherence of realism and not actually required to engage in everyday epistemic discourse. The absence of tranquility is here symptomatic of a psychological attachment to a standard of truth that, due to its ultimate conceptual vacuity, can never be met, and the Pyrrhonian strategy lies in attempting to reduce the prevalence of that standard by painstakingly explicating its vacuity through the skeptical modes and thereby inducing *epoche*. As the standard of truth is eroded by the skeptical modes, what qualifies as a belief is transformed in lockstep, until what is left of the latter is "acquiescence to appearance".

Sextus' expression of the problem of induction completes this process wholly and decisively, despite being a comparatively small part of the skeptical repertoire. By pointing out the circularity of Aristotelian syllogistic logic, Sextus implicitly makes a phenomenological point about knowledge which would be later elucidated by Hume: that propositions are the products of customary, self-reinforcing reactions to patterned experience: "thus when they (the dogmatists)…wish to conclude from the universal proposition 'Everything human is animal' to the particular proposition 'Therefore Socrates is an animal', which (as we have suggested) is actually confirmatory of the universal proposition in virtue of the inductive mode, they fall into the reciprocal argument, confirming the universal proposition inductively by way of each of the particulars and the particular deductively from the universal."[4] While not obviously an expression of the traditional problem, this argument demonstrates a key point implicit in Hume's philosophy of mind which gives rise to the more specific formulation: universals are the only things which allow us to categorize experience into particulars, and yet the occurrence of such particulars is the only available evidence for the "reality" of universals. The lesson which the Pyrrhonian (and later and in more explicit terms, Hume) asks us to draw here is that the formulation of propositions, and their acceptance as being true or false, is entirely a matter of conditioned human behaviour. The framing of

[4] Ibid., 120

arguments as chains of evidence which aim at metaphysical truth through their elevation of a conclusion to the standards of a natural epistemic norm (such as deductive validity or inductive confirmation) thus represents a severe outstripping of the kinds of conceptual resources we have available to us as well as a misunderstanding about what those epistemic norms actually imply about the propositions which meet them. The circularity that Sextus outlines is problematic only if the skeptic's interlocutor is committed to the metaphysical truth of the conclusion: otherwise, the reciprocal support offered by the universal and particular are taken as compelling evidence for the acceptance of the conclusion, reflective as that support is of common epistemic practice. The logical vacuity of induction is here implied in order to reveal the logical vacuity of epistemic processes generally.

When Williams chastises the skeptic for implicitly "raising the epistemic stakes" through the application of the Agrippan trilemma to a mundane assertion, he chastises the skeptic for importing a realist conception of knowledge into a conversation that functioned perfectly well without one and erroneously concluding from the subsequent collapse of coherence that "knowledge" is generally unattainable. But the skeptic does not subscribe to the standards that they place on an interlocutor: as Sextus is careful to emphasize, a Pyrrhonian subscribes to *nothing* with the standards of truth that the skeptical modes attack, and Williams therefore confuses the skeptical argument with its target. In order to understand how the problem of induction fully disposes of the realist's metaphysical commitments as well as to understand the fundamental source of Sextus' successful attack on realist epistemological norms as being the isolation of a deep asymmetry between epistemic phenomenology and realist theory, it will be helpful to turn to Hume's philosophy of mind and exegesis of the problem of induction that it produces.

For Hume, a deceptively simple axiom in his philosophy of mind gives rise to a massive proliferation of what might be called "skeptical conclusions". This axiom is the copy principle, which states that every simple idea is copied from a chronologically antecedent simple impression. Hume's empiricism sacrifices access to the "external world" by rendering it a vacuous concept: the copy principle

precludes the formation of ideas which do not find their ultimate origin in the copy principle, meaning none of our ideas can ever contain semantic content which was not first copied from some experience. The realist notion of a world unmarred by the "filter" of human perception is thus quite literally inconceivable and can therefore play no role in epistemic processes. With the copy principle in place, Hume can swiftly dispose of a litany of realist characterizations of philosophical concepts as vacuous through a similar line of reasoning. The notion of existence is reduced by the copy principle to an empty appendage used to talk about experience: "The idea of existence then is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent."[5], in stark contrast to any possible realist definitions which rely on the inherence of an object in an external world. By observing that the idea of cause and effect can only have been copied from repeated instances of conjoined impressions, since the idea of causal necessity itself has no correspondent impression, Hume postulates a principle of association called custom, or habit, which is a law of psychological association in which the ideas copied from regularly repeated impressions become associated with one another to the point where the appearance of one impression conjures the idea of the other, producing what would be traditionally called a causal inference. Causality is thereby reduced to the customary association of impressions.

The consequences of the reduction of causality to custom are remarkable. As Hume puts it succinctly in his *Treatise*: "Thus all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation."[6]. Moreover, Hume describes this principle of association as the source of many concepts that have disparate origins in a realist paradigm. Object identity is here a product of custom since the presumption of an object's continued identity despite its transformation or removal from our senses is explicable only by the habituated anticipation of that object's continued identity upon perceiving it a number of times. Notably, this serves as a direct response to the Cartesian "wax argument" wherein a transforming piece of wax is known necessarily by the intellect, since each of its physical qualities shift, meaning it cannot be "known

[5] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edit. Ernest Mossner. (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1985), 152
[6] David Hume, *Treatise*, 153.

by the senses alone". For Hume, the operation of the "intellect" which Descartes describes is actually just a principle of association composed of patterned impressions and the anticipatory idea of their conjoined effects that it produces.

It is not difficult to see what this radical empiricism does to realist metaphysical notions and epistemic norms. "Existence" cannot be a concept devoid of experiential information, because the copy principle precludes the existence of *any* concept which is devoid of information with genealogical roots in a simple impression. Truth cannot be the correspondence of a proposition to the external world, since "external world" is similarly reduced to an empty concept which is impossible to meaningfully differentiate from our particular internal impressions, despite ostensibly referring to a world independent of those impressions. Consequently, belief cannot be a commitment to a proposition's metaphysical truth. For Hume, beliefs are instead distinguished from idle thoughts by their vivacity, or put another way, by the strength with which the principle of custom acted in forming them. When an idea arises with a certain level of vivacity, or strength of causal anticipation, it becomes a belief. Belief thus has nothing to do with metaphysical truth and everything to do with the qualitative nature of the idea under question, which in turn is determined by the strength with which custom acted in forming it: this falls perfectly in line with Pyrrhonism, which aims at a conception of belief that "acquiesces to appearances", that for Hume (and occasionally for Sextus himself) might be rephrased as "acquiescence to custom".

Hume's empiricism, and the logical vacuity of induction which it precipitates, thus amounts to a total rejection of the coherence of a realist epistemology which postulates natural standards of truth inhering in natural kinds of belief and a realist metaphysics which postulates an external world which generates those standards and determines a proposition's relationship to them. This result is largely reflective of the stated goal of Pyrrhonism: the rejection of the notion that one can ultimately determine the metaphysical truth of any given proposition, and the shrinking of belief to a simple notion of vivid, behaviour-precipitating conceptualization. Finally, assenting to the truth of Hume's phenomenology leaves the realist in a very peculiar position. For the realist a belief is true if and only if what it asserts is

reflected by external reality: but if external reality qua reality devoid of human ideation is reduced by the copy principle to an empty concept, then there will *never* be an instance of a true belief, since what a belief asserts will necessarily be something other than nothing. Attempting to reach metaphysical truth by postulating an external world less radically different from our perceptions does not obviate this outcome, since an infinitesimally small difference between the semantic content of a proposition and the external "object" it denotes is both necessary for the division between objects and perceptions to be maintained and sufficient to preclude their absolute similarity and thereby establish the truth of the belief. This outcome is the ultimate goal of both Pyrrhonism and of the Humean skeptical project: realism has been transformed into an *epistemic error theory* at stark odds with everyday epistemic phenomenology. As Williams says (speaking, ironically, about Agrippan skepticism): "A theory which represents working practices as unworkable is a bad theory." Accepting Hume's phenomenology entails characterizing the realist position as precisely such a theory and, if Williams is to be heeded, entails disposing of the realist position in favour of a dramatically humbled concept of truth and correspondingly benign concept of belief.

Before moving on to Williams' contextualism as an example of just such a conceptual back-pedalling, it will be useful to explicate how deeply the symmetry between Hume's empiricism and Sextus' explication of Pyrrhonism runs. Of primary note in both Hume's *Treatise* and Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is a tension between the depth of their skepticism and the breadth of their positive claims, illustrated in Hume by his explicit disposal of induction as a non-logical process in one instance and the forwarding of statements which openly rely on induction in others, as in this passage which occurs multiple sections after his deconstruction of causation: "I conclude, by an induction which seems to me very evident, that an opinion or belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction, not in the nature, or the order of its parts, but in the manner of its being conceived."[7] As we have seen, moments like these were of primary concern for Sextus as well, who was worried that they may invite charges of

[7] Ibid., 146

self-consumption. Sextus and Hume make use of the same response to such charges: the notions of truth and justification under which they are writing are those reduced notions that have been necessitated by their skeptical arguments. Neither asserts the inviolability of their observations, and they construe their arguments as "reports of evident experience" in the case of Sextus or as instances of a particular kind of human behaviour in the case of Hume. Pyrrhonian assent is exhaustively described by the absence of committal to the metaphysical truth or falsity of a held statement, and Hume's philosophy of mind explicitly disposes of the possibility of a such a committal being coherent, leaving Humean belief similarly stripped of a relationship with metaphysical truth.

Williams' contextualism, despite ostensibly aiming at a "solution" to skepticism, shares a modest conception of both truth and belief with Pyrrhonism and Humean empiricism. The deflationary account of truth which Williams borrows from Quine construes truth as a modifier on sentences which allows people to talk about sentences rather than the content of sentences, reducing truth to an instrumental concept which aids in epistemic conversations by allowing representation of a person's stance toward a particular proposition (namely, whether a person commits to the logical implications of the proposition). Hume's deflated definition of existence combined with his phenomenological definition of belief yield an epistemological theory which falls closely in line with the "default and challenge" model described by Williams which this deflated notion of truth figures into. Here, a belief is justified by context-specific epistemic standards unless a context-appropriate defeater arises. If, as Hume argues, belief is distinguished from idle fancy exclusively by the higher vivacity of the former, and the only available defeaters are other beliefs formed by custom (held by either the same individual or others), then there is no sense in which a belief can be either true or false independent of a behavioural context: truth and falsity are *behavioural dispositions* towards propositions. Beliefs are simply conditioned and fluctuating aspects of human psychology which might be reinforced or relinquished upon new experiences, such as a challenge for justification or the observation of new evidence, which motivate the disposal or affirmation of the belief. Even upon being challenged, the relinquishing of a belief and its replacement with a new

one *never* involves a recognition of the metaphysical falsity of one belief and the metaphysical truth of another, since truth and falsity in the realist sense are not quantifiable properties of propositions or even coherently conceivable, being as they are fundamentally empty concepts. Williams' attack on skepticism involves isolating some principles of realism that he says the skeptic commits to, but a review of Hume's views shows that the disposal of those realist commitments is precisely the goal of the empirical skeptic.

The primary skeptical commitment which Williams claims stands in want of justification he names the "Prior Grounding conception of justification". The prior grounding requirement is further subdivided into four sub-requirements, two of which are of particular interest in comparing Williams' charge with extant skeptical beliefs. Of these, "Evidentialism", Williams maintains, is the skeptic's commitment to the notion that good grounds for a belief can only consist of propositions that contribute to the likely truth of the belief. "The Possession Principle" in turn states that a belief must be supported by evidence which is possessed and effectively used by the believer in order for the belief to be well-grounded. Hume's philosophy of mind and reduction of epistemology to a phenomenology of non-rational principles of association through the problem of induction precludes the cogency of either of these requirements within the skeptical framework. This is succinctly demonstrated in a passage of his *Treatise* wherein Hume presents the example of a person approaching a river who then stops so as not to be pulled away by the current, despite not first articulating the elaborate evidential chain to justify the inference which Williams claims the skeptic demands: "But can we think, that on this occasion he reflects on any past experience, and called to remembrance instances, that he has seen or heard of, in order to discover the effects of water on animal bodies? No surely; this is not the method in which he proceeds in his reasoning"[8]. Hume's disposal of a realist epistemology and metaphysics entails precisely what Williams thought such a procedure would: the disposal of the prior grounding requirement as an accurate description of epistemic phenomenology. Moreover, this result is reflected in the very target to which Williams ascribes a commitment to the prior grounding requirement: the Pyrrhonian. In discussing the

[8] Ibid., 153

"standard of skeptical persuasion", Sextus describes belief-formation as a process which makes no use of the prior grounding requirement, with the same passivity of assertion that appears in Hume's example: "We say, then, that the standard of the Sceptical persuasion is what is apparent, implicitly meaning by this the appearances; for they depend on passive and unwilled feelings and are not objects of investigation…thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions-"[9]. The Pyrrhonian, like Hume and Williams, cannot characterize knowledge as requiring realist justification because the skeptical modes and the problem of induction reveal the incoherence of realist justification as a concept. Thus the prior grounding requirement has no role to play in the epistemic practices which result from both the skeptical modes and from Hume's explication of the problem of induction, and Williams' charge that skepticism is unjustified represents a deep misunderstanding of the purpose of the empirical skeptical projects.

The benefits of the rejection of the realist conception of truth through the problem of induction involve refuge from a litany of conceptual difficulties, one of the most striking of which is Cartesian skepticism. The problem of induction renders the postulation of an external world incoherent by reducing our epistemic equipment for concept-formation and inference to a set of principles of association which could not represent a thing defined by its isolation from any interference from those principles, viz. an "external" world. The problem of underdetermination raised by Cartesian skeptical hypotheses, wherein we are stripped of a method for determining whether or not our perceptions are veridical due to the coherence of mutually exclusive skeptical hypotheses with our experience, is no longer an open question. *Veridicality itself* is disposed of as an incoherent concept, relying as it does on the concept of a world independent of perception when Hume's empiricism precludes the conceivability of *anything* independent of perception.

[9] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines*, 23

The skeptic's target, contrary to the worries of Williams and countless other responders to radical philosophical skepticism, is not our ability to "know anything". Rather, the skeptic aims to portray as disastrously incoherent a realist conception of knowledge which incorporates a standard of truth radically removed from common, or any possible, epistemic practice. "Common epistemic practice" is indeed rather the finish-line for empirical skepticism, and this is clearly demonstrated by Sextus Empiricus' description of the skeptical persuasion. Upon disposing of the realist definition of knowledge, Pyrrhonian and Humean skepticism bring "knowledge" into greater reflective equilibrium by integrating into it deflated accounts of truth and belief as well as the wholesale disposition of logical justification as an epistemically relevant concept, completely and necessarily absent as it is from common epistemic practice.

The project of empirical skepticism is thus best understood as an attempt to diagnose the behaviour of philosophical realists and thereby provide an appropriate cure for the conceptual difficulties of realism in the form of a grand *reductio ad absurdum* of the entire realist project. Sextus Empiricus, through the skeptical modes and a prototypical explication of the problem of induction, demonstrates that philosophical realism sets for itself empirically unattainable and conceptually incoherent standards of truth and justification. A commitment to a proposition's metaphysical truth instead amounts to the occurrence of an idiosyncratic emotional state characterized by the anxiety of wanting a proposition to meet an unattainable-because-incoherent standard of truth. In a fashion appropriate to the medical school of his namesake, Sextus consequently advocates for the universal suspension of judgments regarding the occurrence of obscure metaphysical qualities like propositional correspondence as a swift and universally applicable treatment for realists who wish to achieve tranquility. The incoherence of metaphysical and epistemological realism implied by Pyrrhonism is more fully elucidated by Hume's philosophy of mind, which demonstrates that the logical vacuity of induction is symptomatic of the logical vacuity of cognitive operations generally, which are instead guided by behavioural patterns of association operating on sense-impressions. Custom, being the principle which gives rise to causal inference, here acts as the

fundamental source of all human understanding and inference, and thereby insists that the definition of belief as anything other than an idea of a particular vivacity induced by a particular instance of customary association with an impression necessarily exceeds the epistemic material available to us and is therefore a vacuous definition of belief at odds with common epistemic phenomenology. Likewise, truth and falsity in the realist sense of correspondence are disposed of as nonsensical, relying as they do on an incoherent concept of an external world and thereby precipitating an epistemic error theory which is profoundly asymmetrical with common epistemic practice. Hume's analysis of belief into particular patterns of human behaviour and of justification into non-rational phenomenology is mirrored in Williams' contextualism, and both philosophies represent theoretical embodiments of the stated goals of the old Pyrrhonians. Williams' contextualism is thus far from an argument against skepticism, and instead acts as a realization of the skeptic's goal of the disposition of metaphysical truth as a coherent concept, of justification as evidential proof of the correspondence between a belief and the external world, and of belief as a commitment to the metaphysical truth of a proposition.

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