

SCEPTICISM AND METAPHILOSOPHY

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By

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To Adelard and Rolande Thibeault
and their long-lasting, loving marriage of which there can be no doubt

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ABSTRACT

Scepticism, taken as a challenge to the possibility of justifying knowledge claims in general, has a history perhaps as long and varied as attempts to construct positive theories of knowledge. The relation that holds between scepticism and the rest of epistemology is often assumed to be straightforwardly adversarial. However, in light of the widespread “end or transformation” debate within epistemology in recent decades, the proliferation of sophisticated scholarship concerning scepticism and justification may be taken as a *prima facie* endorsement of the continuing vitality of traditional epistemology.

The publication in 1984 of Barry Stroud’s *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, focused interest in the epistemological community on the burden of specifically modern (global, post-Cartesian, external world) scepticism. However, during the overlapping two decades since *Significance*, the influence of Richard Rorty’s work (particularly *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* published in 1979) has led to a growing suspicion that epistemology has neither a stable nor defensible mandate. In this thesis, I try to connect the two discussions in a novel way, by arguing that the metaphilosophical problems arising from the stalemate I diagnose in the vibrant contemporary scepticism debate does not suggest that epistemology as a discipline is robustly healthy. I characterize metaphilosophical issues as a cluster of concerns involving the *methodology, nature, aim, self-image and criteria of satisfaction* of doing philosophy. Most generally, metaphilosophy is a philosophical exploration of the nature of philosophy; more specifically, it deals with the expectations and aspirations of inquiry.

David Hume is rightly remembered as a thoughtful exponent of the power of sceptical reasoning. More recently, he has been recognized for his influential attempt to develop a naturalistic theory of belief that serves to explain how we form and tenaciously cling to our most deeply held beliefs—despite our inability to rationally justify them. I contend that there are metaphilosophical lessons to be learned from Hume’s struggle to maintain and defend the theoretical invulnerability of scepticism, despite his evident discomfort adjusting to the potential consequences of such a position. Michael Williams has been an insightful critic of the “pessimism” that he detects in the work of Stroud and “the New Humeans.” I outline the major issues in his exchange with Stroud, and evaluate the strengths of each position. I also argue that Williams’ “contextualism” fails to rescue epistemology in any substantial way from the fundamental sceptical challenges that can be raised. For each of the central philosophers under consideration (David Hume, Barry Stroud, and Michael Williams), I construct an account of what I call their criteria of satisfaction. The specific classification of particular criteria is much less important here than the metaphilosophical lesson that I extract from the nature of the frequent clashes between different epistemologist’s favoured criteria.

Into the contemporary debate about modern scepticism, I introduce ancient sceptical concerns like the “problem of the criterion” and the Five Modes of Agrippa, which serve to illustrate the importance of long-standing sceptical metaphilosophical considerations for this discussion. I contend that these ancient problems can help clarify

the nature of the contemporary statement in the debate about modern scepticism. Even if epistemologists become dissatisfied with what they take to be the criteria of satisfaction of the traditional project, motivating the adoption of revised criteria of satisfaction will still encounter grave difficulties.

Finally, I discuss possible morals to be drawn from the wider metaphilosophical concerns. I ultimately argue that the remarkably active state of contemporary literature about scepticism should not be mistaken as a straightforward positive indicator of the continued health of philosophical theories of knowledge. To the contrary, an examination of the metaphilosophical issues surrounding scepticism reveals even more urgent problems with the inherent variability and instability of epistemic criteria of satisfaction. An exploration of these issues threatens to lead if not to metaphilosophical scepticism, then at least to a thorough reevaluation of the nature and self-image of the epistemological project.

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CHAPTER 1: Why Should We Bother Investigating Scepticism?

It would be hard to imagine a claim more at odds with our ordinary, common sense view of the world than what passes as the general sceptical conclusion:¹ We do not (and perhaps cannot) *know* that the world around us exists. This claim stands defiantly counter to our unreflective experience, which seems to suggest that we interact with an external world of independent objects on a constant basis. It is, of course, not suitable to merely assert the reality of our apparent interaction with the external world, because to do so is simply to *beg the question* against the case for scepticism. All but the most radical scepticism admits of the apparent interaction. The question aims at our *justification* for claiming to know that such interaction occurs, or more specifically that we can infer from our experience of appearances to independently existing objects. That we seem to experience an external world is not disputed. Rather, this fact counts as the most basic common ground for sceptical and nonsceptical accounts alike. A popular formulation of a sceptical challenge, usually presented from within the framework of a thought experiment like Descartes's evil deceiver or contemporary Brain-in-a-Vat variants,² suggests that our ordinary experience could be exactly as it is without there being any justified inference or reason to posit the independent existence of such a world.

Ordinarily, we probably would not even consider such possibilities (let alone the need to defeat them in order to claim to "know" that, say, "I am now holding a piece of paper in my hands"). Philosophically, however, it would seem incumbent upon practitioners of positive epistemologies to explain what justifies our dismissal of such

sceptical scenarios. That is, proponents of positive epistemologies must show how it is that the supposed “threat” of scepticism at the theoretical level can be overcome, or that despite appearances, it has never been intelligibly formulated at all. The tension between our ordinary and philosophical perspectives, and the question of what may be distinctive about epistemological inquiry, are central to contemporary discussions of scepticism. They will be treated in general throughout, including a more specific emphasis on what epistemologists take to be constitutive of their project. Importantly, for Hume, every attempt to approach human knowledge philosophically will *naturally* (and inevitably) end in scepticism. For Hume, philosophical reflection leads to scepticism about the external world, causal relations, and about the rationality of inductive inferences; just as surely, ordinary, non-philosophical experience engenders confidence that there is an independent world ruled by regular, universal laws such as causal connections, future instances of which we can reasonably infer. Hume’s philosophy is particularly valuable since it shows signs of recognizing both the expectations arising from traditional inquiry, and the problems involved with such a self-image. The shift in his attitude toward epistemology between *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* is particularly enlightening since the difference turns more on adjusting metaphilosophical aspirations, than having successfully overcome the problem of scepticism. Additionally, Hume seems to point the way toward acknowledging the force of philosophical scepticism, without thereby jeopardizing our most deeply held beliefs. Hume’s pioneering naturalism will be explored, as will contemporary versions later in this study.

Dogmatically asserting the primacy of our ordinary, common sense observations cannot settle the philosophical issue of scepticism, since that is precisely what scepticism calls into question. Furthermore, any attempt to deny the relevance of philosophical reflection on our ordinary knowledge claims (which amounts to dogmatically asserting the primacy of ordinary, common sense observations) is tantamount to spurning philosophy, by rejecting the possibility that further reflection on our ordinary claims to knowledge is a relevant or worthy task. Thus, philosophers would dismiss such a response as non-philosophical or anti-philosophical. And this, I would suggest, is why scepticism is rightfully acknowledged to produce a troubling tension within traditional epistemology: in its more powerful formulations, scepticism points out an irreconcilable conflict between what, for practical purposes, we must ordinarily assume we can know, and what, on the other hand, can be philosophically justified. Philosophy tells us that for all we know, objects external to one's own mind may be illusory. Our deeply felt realist *intuitions* tell us otherwise. Perhaps for this reason alone, scepticism about the external world, at least from a common sense (or non-philosophically reflective) perspective, can be seen not only merely as a "philosophical" problem, but also as a "philosopher's philosophy problem." That is to say, even for those interested (or at least tolerant) of philosophical reflection and speculation, global doubt about the existence of the external world seems as removed from a *reasonable* concern as could be imagined.

The words I have used to introduce the above thumbnail sketch of the status of scepticism are, of course, not accidental. The above description contains the seeds of every concern I wish to explore in this study, except one. The italicized words, or variants

of them—natural, know, certainty, justification, reasonable belief, rationality, intuitions, ordinary versus philosophical perspectives—are the most prevalent concepts under scrutiny in the current debate about scepticism. The one crucial concept not invoked in my thumbnail sketch was *metaphilosophical principles*. The cluster of concerns that I take to be metaphilosophical includes the *methodology, nature, aim, self-image and criteria of satisfaction* of doing philosophy. Most generally, metaphilosophy is a philosophical exploration of the nature of philosophy; more specifically, it deals with the expectations and aspirations of inquiry. I omitted it above, just as nearly every contemporary discussion of scepticism does. It is a primary purpose of this study to show (a) that this absence indeed has been the case, (b) what the consequences of this oversight have been, and (c) what possible lessons we can take from redressing this situation. This will include paying closer attention to the metaphilosophical assumptions that underlie various treatments of scepticism, and certain shared assumptions as well. The wide-ranging consequences will take us beyond mere discussions of modern scepticism, beyond even wider issues in epistemology, toward a metaphilosophical investigation into the various ways of understanding the self-identity of philosophical inquiry and theory construction. Thus, introducing an exploration of metaphilosophical analysis into the contemporary debate about scepticism will involve a broadening of the discussion into the traditional aspirations and aims of epistemology and raise the question of what role revision might play in the future of epistemology. Metaphilosophical issues typically involve fundamental choices: the choice of methodology, criteria of truth and relevance, and standards for concept formation and revision, (which, ideally, would be unanimous,

but barring that, at least capable of widespread consensus). Disagreement at this level of the debate is marred by the threat of an infinite regress of justification, the dogmatic assertion of ungrounded assumptions, or charges of unavoidable, fundamental circularity. These concerns, we will see, are as ancient as they are formidable.

This study will not focus exclusively on scepticism about the external world. This stands counter to the majority of recent work on scepticism.³ I will argue that an exploration of the contemporary debate on modern scepticism leads us back toward ancient sceptical concerns about theory construction and adequacy. In addition to bracketing the concerns and arguments of ancient scepticism, contemporary epistemologists tend to offer some sort of “diagnosis” as to how a faulty epistemological concept or two has led to the persistence of undefeated sceptical possibilities. In emphasizing the metaphilosophical dimension of the contemporary debate, I will not attempt a novel diagnosis of the problem of the external world, but rather, I aim to synthesize the state-of-the-art, and comment on the prospects of progress and the obstacles impeding further development. I contend that a stalemate has been reached in the contemporary debate, and that the future prospects of traditional epistemology are not very promising.

A few words about the motivation of this study can be instructive about its ultimate direction. Since the publication of Barry Stroud’s *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (1984; hereafter cited as *Significance*), interest in the problem of the external world has never wavered. Stroud’s conditional vindication of scepticism brought to the attention of epistemologists the *provisional respect* that should be afforded

to sceptical arguments. Importantly, Stroud introduced an emphasis on (a) what *significance* philosophical scepticism may have, while (b) calling into question the very possibility of formulating a satisfactory positive epistemology. However, just prior to its publication and during an overlapping period ever since, (roughly since the publication of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979) a persistent strain in the literature has focused on the question of the "end or transformation"⁴ of epistemology, or more dramatically, its "death." The tenor of this discussion has fluctuated from prophecies of an impending demise to eulogies, or conversely, to charges that the proposed dismissal is overly hasty, if not completely misguided. Granting the extreme nature of the claims of external world scepticism, epistemology has given rise in recent years to an equally bizarre suspicion: epistemology itself may be dead, dying, or impossible. That is, a field of interest with a twenty-five hundred year history may not be capable of arriving at satisfactory conclusions or agreement. More startling is the claim that epistemology may not even be able to get off the ground.

It struck me as exceedingly odd that within a philosophical climate that has been dominated with discussions of the "death of" epistemology in particular, and philosophy in general, such a "traditional problem" as external world scepticism was also receiving so much attention. It is my intention to show (primarily through the work of Hume, Stroud, and Williams) that an analysis of these philosophers' various treatments of scepticism reveals fundamental disagreement at a metaphilosophical level. It is prevalent in the literature to read that various 'solutions' to the sceptical challenge are "unsatisfactory" but rarely, if ever, are the *criteria of satisfaction* laid out. It is my hope

to make clear what each of the above authors hold (with varying degrees of acknowledgement) to be the *requirements* of a satisfactory account of why scepticism is, or is not, a problem. This, I think, requires an analysis of their metaphilosophical commitments, which reveals fundamentally different conceptions of the nature and scope of philosophical inquiry. In so doing, I find that renewed interest in scepticism is not as puzzling as it first seemed, because on my reading, it connects with the prevalent “end or transformation” debates in multiple, important ways. More broadly, this includes an account of what the aspirations are (and ought to be) for epistemology in particular, and philosophy in general. The very self-image of epistemology, as well as its value, is under review. Scepticism, then, can be seen as important to contemporary philosophy insofar as it relates to key epistemological issues, such as revising theories of justification, but also metaphilosophical issues concerning the very nature of constructing satisfactory philosophical questions and answers. I want to get clear (or at least clearer) on what epistemologists are claiming that their peers are failing to capture. Then, I will show that fragmentation at the metaphilosophical level is what divides the discussion. Finally, I want to suggest that the prospects for recovery for epistemology as traditionally conceived may be very dire.

By way of drawing limits to this already broad study, I want to acknowledge that I do *not* intend to join the debate about scepticism on the front lines, either by offering an original response to scepticism or supporting an existing contemporary response. Such a route, I contend, does not offer any promise of resolution in the usual sense. I will show that there is indeed widespread agreement on most of the issues in the contemporary

debate, but only in a *conditional* sense. That is, the majority of epistemologists are willing to grant that if we start from assumption set g, we will arrive at scepticism; or less often, if we start from assumption set f, we will *avoid* scepticism. The problem, however, lies more fundamentally with these sets of assumptions. An inability to justify metaphilosophical choices, regarding both methodology and criteria of adjudication, will prove to be the obstacle in need of the direst attention. A version of “the problem of the criterion,” familiar to other areas of epistemology, will appear in the final chapter in a particularly troubling form.

The title question of this chapter (“Why should we bother investigating scepticism?”) seems to import a bias toward a positive response. To focus on whether we should even bother before providing reasons why we might, we could shorten the question to “Should we bother investigating scepticism?” That my initial answer to this question could be given just as accurately as a qualified ‘yes,’ or a qualified ‘no’ provides a clue as to the motivation of this study. The point is that I do not think the importance of investigating scepticism is to rationally secure our belief in, say, the external world. Barry Stroud stresses that

[he] would grant—indeed insist—that philosophical skepticism is not something we should seriously consider adopting or accepting [...]. Taking the paradoxical reasonings seriously and re-examining the assumptions they rest on can be important and fruitful when there is no question at all of our ever contemplating adopting a “theory” or doctrine embodying the absurd conclusion.⁵

Stroud is making two separate points: (1) Regardless of the result of our epistemologies, we should not or perhaps could not, ever conclude that knowledge is impossible. He also adds, however, the important suggestion that (2) working backward from the “absurd

conclusion” of scepticism may have considerable value for the task of better understanding what we hope to achieve with philosophical theorizing about knowledge. It is my contention that exploring the metaphilosophical foundations of the scepticism debate may lead to important reflection on the nature of epistemological inquiry.

Since the publication of Barry Stroud’s influential *Significance*, debate about the status of scepticism has produced a wide range of intense scrutiny both in support of his provisional vindication of scepticism, and against his more pessimistic claims that we may be doomed to dissatisfaction in epistemology. For my purpose, it is only important to get clear on his account of scepticism in outline, and its relation to his assumptions about epistemology and philosophical inquiry in general. However, while Stroud’s position is undoubtedly important to my study, it is admittedly so in a derivative sense. That is to say, I want to acknowledge Stroud’s influence as a catalyst in sparking much of the past twenty years of provocative debate about scepticism, but in a cautionary way. I will argue that Stroud’s siren song (“I can’t get no satisfaction”) is the result of a strict adherence to a very traditional (i.e. modern) conception of knowledge and philosophy. In short, I see Stroud’s contribution to the debate as programmatic, and in part, I will assess how his work stands or falls under the weight of the responsibility and privilege of setting the parameters for the ensuing debate.⁶

A related question should also be posed: What can we hope to learn from an investigation of this problem? I have already suggested that, contra appearances, the lesson is not likely about the ostensible topic of discussion: our knowledge of the external world. On a more traditional investigation, there are three broad directions our research

might lead us in: (a) that we are in fact somehow justified in claiming to know the topics that scepticism puts into question, (b) that scepticism is somehow defective either since it is semantically unintelligible or tied to alterable epistemological concepts, (c) that we are unable to either (i) show that scepticism is unintelligible nor (ii) that it rests on contentious, avoidable theoretical presuppositions, but nonetheless *feel* that we must continue to search. The implicit rationale or intuition behind this view is that the conflict between our philosophical analyses and our common sense *must* be able to be overcome. An example of this last position, (c), is found in Reid Buchanan's "Deflationary Approaches to Scepticism." He concludes that despite showing that the most powerful general strategy (deflationism) for overcoming the theoretical vigor of scepticism in order to reconcile our ordinary and philosophical perspectives fails, that "there must nevertheless be something amiss in the considerations that lead to such an absurdity."⁷ I will argue in later chapters that the strength of one's commitment to intuitions arising from traditional epistemological concepts does much of the work in pinning someone into this uncomfortable position. The nature of the discomfort shared by Stroud and others who follow him is captured in Buchanan's words: "those of us who are uneasy with the tension between the common sense and philosophical perspectives [...] will continue to feel the pull to discover exactly what is amiss, *no matter how bleak* the prospects may seem."⁸ Undoubtedly, the quest for (a) is what drives the traditional debate. Anything less will fail to satisfy most epistemologists.⁹ In Chapters 3 and 4, I will examine attempts by various epistemologists to motivate revision of various criteria of satisfaction in an attempt to avert this disconcerting stalemate.

More controversially, I want to suggest that the “lesson of scepticism,” and hence why we should investigate scepticism, is that it offers a clear case within epistemology that calls into question the viability of the entire traditional project. What is to count as the “traditional project” of epistemology, which is developed more fully in Chapter 3, may itself be a contentious issue. For now, traditional epistemology should be taken as co-extensive with a distinctive form of inquiry that seeks to secure knowledge (as opposed to mere opinion) by appealing to justification and evidence, which is presented in a theory that adheres to the formal rules of argumentation recognized within the Western tradition. In the minds of many philosophers, scepticism—taken as the claim that knowledge is impossible—obviously aims to call into question (since it directly conflicts with) the traditional project of epistemology. Nevertheless, I will be arguing that an examination of the contemporary debate about scepticism raises much more troubling questions about the viability of epistemology. Unlike Rorty’s familiar account,¹⁰ I do not want to focus on showing that epistemology is merely a historically conditioned phase that while once useful has now ceased to justify its continued existence or study. Rather, I aim to show—using the concrete case of the contemporary debate about scepticism—that metaphilosophical disputes threaten not only traditional epistemology but also the possibility of revised projects.

There is a much wider, even fundamental, importance to the questions I want to raise. It should be noted that I am not suggesting that modern scepticism is the only way to get at these philosophical issues. To the contrary, I think many current, lively discussions in all areas of philosophy could point us to the wider considerations I want to

suggest. I will argue that whether one views scepticism as a serious threat to epistemology in particular, or philosophy in general, is tied more to one's *prior* metaphilosophical principles than to one's *subsequent* analysis of, say, Cartesian methodological scepticism or Humean inductive scepticism. That is to say, in assessments of the validity of the sceptical challenge, the criteria of satisfaction laid out *prior to the investigation* or which arise *during the proposed inquiry or diagnosis* are the primary determinates of one's final position. Whether one ultimately, like Barry Stroud, must acknowledge the naturalness and force of the sceptical challenge or like Michael Williams' can claim to see past (or around) the sceptical morass and its roots in traditional, optional epistemological assumptions is (pre-)determined by one's view of the nature and constraints on philosophical theorizing. Nothing is more common in contemporary literature on scepticism than to have all sides accusing the others of not having provided a "satisfactory" answer to scepticism. What is almost entirely lacking, however, is explicit discussion about what the criteria for satisfaction are or should be.

So, by way of examining the current state of the flourishing debate on philosophical scepticism, I hope to suggest at least four wider considerations throughout this study that arise from my research: (1) the current twenty year revival of interest in the traditional problem of scepticism (and particularly Hume's treatment) should not be seen as out of place in the wider philosophical climate. Recently, this scene has been dominated variously by talk of the "end" or "death" of epistemology, metaphysics, and even philosophy itself. There is indeed much to be learned from Hume's attempt to show the consequences of empiricism, and its ramifications for the self-image of philosophy;

(2) Although there is plenty of agreement about what is at stake in discussing scepticism, what has most been lacking is an examination of the metaphilosophical assumptions, regarding the *nature, scope, and task of philosophy*, which I contend (3) are to be found in an analysis of a philosopher's adherence to various *criteria of satisfaction*. (4) This reveals that despite the considerable *conditional agreement* about the issues, the disagreement between Stroud and Williams lies at the fundamental (and often *unargued for*) level of metaphilosophical commitments. The recommendation of this study is that the interested parties to the scepticism debate should focus more of their collective attention on the most fundamental metaphilosophical assumptions that are informing their discussions. In light of the repeated failures to produce a non-sceptical traditional epistemology, the decision to revise fundamental criteria of satisfaction may remain as difficult to motivate as it is to resist.

Now I will make explicit thematic questions that will be suggested throughout my analysis. Indeed, a close examination of the metaphilosophical underpinnings of recent discussions about scepticism reveals that the value of examining a traditional problem like scepticism can be twofold: (1) It can serve as a barometer of the well-being of philosophical health in particular, and (2) Give a point of entry from which to examine the current *self-image* of philosophy in general. Philosophers concerned about the status and prospects of philosophy in the 21st century would do well to recognize that renewed attention to a traditional problem like scepticism is not necessarily an indication that the "end or transformation" debate has been settled in favour of philosophy's continuing vitality. Rather, probing the metaphilosophical depths of the various sceptical issues that

face us, may well lead to the conclusion (for some) that philosophy as it has been regarded for many centuries is in danger and needs protection, or perhaps, resuscitation. To others, it may seem like a realization that philosophy as traditionally portrayed has been on life-support for some time now.¹¹ For this latter camp, the question becomes: Will we opt for passive or active euthanasia? For the most radical or revisionary-minded philosophers this entails a reevaluation of the entire epistemological project: Should we hold a funeral, push onward in search of a successor discipline, or abandon the whole enterprise as irredeemably futile? Is it intellectually credible to carry on with what I will call “business-as-usual philosophy” in light of fundamental questions about the nature of the discipline? How the most fundamental metaphilosophical issues relate both to the specific case of scepticism and the more general project of epistemology will be discussed in the final chapter.

By way of summary and introduction, I will offer a brief account of the role of each chapter in this study. Chapter 2 presents an account of Hume’s overall view that focuses on his empiricism, scepticism, and metaphilosophical understanding of the nature, scope, and self-image of philosophy. This includes his considerations about the existence of the external world or “material body,” as well as the possibility of rationally justifying our inferences from past instances. Against the tendency to view Hume as primarily or exclusively a negative, sceptical philosopher, I will emphasize his naturalistic theory of belief. Far from robbing us of our most deeply held beliefs in causation, induction, and a world of external objects beyond our consciousness, Hume provides a causal-explanatory theory of psychological principles, to account for our

continued adherence to beliefs that do not admit of philosophical justification. However, his negative view, if accepted, does have massive ramifications on our understanding of epistemology: specifically its scope and limitations. In addition to gaining a better understanding of Hume's view, including both its sceptical and naturalistic aspects, I will emphasize the shifting attitude he held toward the viability of traditional epistemology.

The discussion of the contemporary debate about scepticism in Chapter 3 focuses on two seemingly contrasting voices in the debate, Barry Stroud and Michael Williams. Barry Stroud's *Significance* ignited a revival of interest in external world scepticism. In the years that followed, he developed an increasingly pessimistic estimation of the possibility of outlining a "satisfactory" non-sceptical epistemology. More recently, Williams has sought to counter this trend toward pessimism about epistemology. He offers a novel diagnosis of the root of the sceptical challenge, and proposes a contextualist theory of knowledge and justification to break the hold of the Humean picture that has inspired Stroud and others. In examining the nature of their conflict, I will center on their explicit and tacit reliance on various criteria of satisfaction. For my purposes, it is less important how Stroud or Williams *apply* their criteria of satisfaction, than it is to explicate what they diagnose as necessary and sufficient features of a satisfactory philosophical account. My attempt to deal with Stroud's contribution, almost exclusively, as having re-framed the problem in such a way as to invite further exploration into metaphilosophical issues about theory construction in epistemology accords with his own suggestion that the significance of *Significance* was primarily programmatic. Accordingly, my focus is on his influential framing of the problem,

especially with reference to the “conditional correctness” of the sceptical conclusion.¹² In other words, my interest with Stroud is in drawing connections between his often unarticulated criteria of satisfaction and his explicit claims that (a) if we grant the traditional (early modern: Cartesian, Lockean, Humean) epistemological framework, then we cannot avoid ending in scepticism, and (b) with all of the tensions accounted for, that there is “no solution”¹³ to the sceptical problem within traditional epistemology. The other focus of Chapter 3 is Michael Williams, who proves to be a key figure in this study of recent work on scepticism for a number of reasons. I will offer an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Williams’s account through an examination of his cluster of key concepts (including the epistemologist’s dilemma, epistemological realism, contextualism as a theory of justification). I am critical not so much of Williams’ attempt to contextualize knowledge and justification as I am about his failure to distinguish between saving traditional epistemology as opposed to proposing a radically revised project and self-image for epistemological inquiry. Contextualism cannot save traditional epistemology. It may offer reasons to reject the traditional epistemological project, but such a move should come with the recognition that nothing less than the self-image of epistemology is being altered.

An underdeveloped possibility in *Significance*, concerning the role of scepticism as a catalyst for carrying out a re-examination of traditional epistemological concepts, and more fundamentally, questioning the very possibility of a viable philosophical theory of knowledge, will be expanded upon in Chapters 3 and 4. Most important for this study will be Stroud’s suggestions about what would count as achieving philosophical

“satisfaction” on the issue of scepticism. Understanding Stroud’s formulation of the constraints at work in constructing a satisfactory non-sceptical epistemology is crucial for explicating the framework under which the past 20 years of scholarship on scepticism has laboured. Stroud’s frequent appeal to the language of “satisfaction,” and the largely unarticulated reasons for holding steadfastly to traditional criteria of satisfaction, is made explicit with an analysis and explication of what I suggest are his, often unstated, criteria of satisfaction. For classificatory purposes, I deal with criteria of satisfaction under the headings of formal, traditional, and intuition-driven criteria. Far from settling the issue, I explore in later chapters the underlying metaphilosophical problems that are unearthed when the feasibility of the traditional epistemological project is questioned.

The concluding chapter attempts to connect the problems arising from recent work on scepticism with the wider debate concerning the status of philosophical theories of knowledge. Here I will introduce two ancient sceptical problems, not relating solely to theories of our knowledge of the external world, but concerning our ability to substantiate or argue for the metaphilosophical principles that shape epistemology. The discussion ranges over metaphilosophical issues such as the extent to which philosophers can and should revise traditional epistemological concepts and whether “the problem of the criterion”—pitched a sufficiently deep level—might not force us to give up the traditional enterprise of epistemology for reasons other than those offered in the past twenty years by philosophers like Rorty and those he has inspired. As well, I will introduce the Five Modes of scepticism attributed to the ancient sceptic Agrippa, to fortify the case made about the problem of the criterion. Although, in the early chapters, I follow the major

figures in the scepticism debate (notably Stroud and Williams) by focusing on scepticism in its more recent formulations, I will raise, in the end, the question of whether some of the ancient sceptical problems have only reappeared at a more fundamental level. The philosophical devastation purported to follow from a stroll through “The Problem of the External World and Its Suburbs”¹⁴ may be avoided only at the cost of inviting the specter of scepticism at a metaphilosophical level.

This final chapter will also continue to explore the tension between traditional and revisionary approaches to philosophy.¹⁵ This includes discussion of the role of intuitions in contemporary epistemology, and the recent pragmatic critiques of Richard Rorty and Richard Miller. Miller is convinced of the futility of traditional approaches to the methodology and aim of analytic philosophy. He recommends taking a radically revisionary stance in all areas of philosophical inquiry, including epistemology. He further contends that with the demise of old-style analytic philosophy and its reliance on intuitions and conceptual analyses to generate definitions, we ought rather to opt for new criteria of concept acceptance. This revisionary approach to philosophy would combine a pragmatic concern for utility with a consequentialist emphasis on the implications of choosing one concept or criterion over another. All of this, Miller claims, can be achieved while avoiding arbitrariness, and overly scientific versions of naturalism. I will explore Miller’s recommendations with specific reference to the contemporary debate on scepticism. Most significant for my study, will be the question of whether such an approach can help provide a more satisfactory response to epistemological scepticism. In the end, Miller’s proposal may prove as unworkable, since unsatisfactory, as it is alluring.

In the final part of the discussion, where I attempt to draw the most troubling consequences of this study, I will also suggest a possible re-thinking of the gap between our traditional aspirations for epistemology as compared to our achievements. In this concluding chapter, I will connect the contemporary “end or transformation” debate with the stalemate that is evident in contemporary discussions of external world scepticism. I will ask further whether the reason why philosophers cannot agree on a satisfactory solution to scepticism actually arises because the debate is not a single one, but rather a number of separate discussions, all with their own presuppositions and criteria of satisfaction and concept acceptance. We should bother to investigate scepticism—philosophical and metaphilosophical—because such an exploration promises to reveal a great deal about our understanding of the value and limitations of philosophical theorizing and inquiry. I will conclude with observations about the most urgent, if not most fruitful, areas for future inquiry. That is, of course, if one were not already convinced that the problems posed would lead to the stillbirth of any proposed successor approach to future inquiry. The contemporary debate about external world scepticism will be seen as intimately connected to the shifting self-image of epistemology in recent decades. The value of exploring the contemporary question about scepticism will not be limited to the legitimacy of our warrant for claiming to know about an external world; to the contrary, the stalemate in the contemporary debate will lead us to face more fundamental, metaphilosophical questions about the nature and self-image of epistemology.

NOTES

¹ Little effort will be made to distinguish between scepticism(s) presented as a conclusion, a challenge, a threat, or an argument, although various accounts present scepticism in these various ways. P.F. Strawson distinguishes at least three ways of presenting the relation of scepticism to epistemology: as a challenge, as a thesis, or as a question. See *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985) 2, 4, 7.

² See Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially “First Meditation”; Hilary Putman, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), especially, Ch. 1.

³ See for instance, Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 1. [Hereafter cited as *Unnatural*.] Williams states from the outset that he will consider only “scepticism in its modern or ‘Cartesian’ form.” For a similar statement of focus, see Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford University Press: Clarendon Press, 1984), vii, 1. [Hereafter cited as *Significance*.]

⁴ See, for instance, the influential anthology *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), especially Charles Taylor’s “Overcoming Epistemology.” A representative work is Michael Williams early book, a revised version of his thesis, *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology*, 2nd Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Importantly, the afterword, composed in 1998 rescinds his most dismal claims about the demise of epistemology. Also see note 9.

⁵ Barry Stroud, “Skepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 81(10) (1984): 545.

⁶ See, for instance, Reid Buchanan, “Deflationary Approaches to Scepticism,” (Ph.D diss., Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster University, 1999). Buchanan not only endorses much of the substance of Stroud’s critiques, but also claims that his own approach is “modeled after Stroud’s book,” and may even be seen “as a continuation and refinement of Stroud’s work,” 23-24.

⁷ Buchanan, “Deflationary Approaches to Scepticism,” 183.

⁸ Buchanan, “Deflationary Approaches to Scepticism,” 183, emphasis added.

⁹ A recent article by Jim Stone offers a notable exception. In “Skepticism as a Theory of Knowledge,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LX, no. 3 (May 2000): 527-545, Stone attempts to face the consequences of what a positive sceptical theory of knowledge would be like. He accepts the prima facie reasons for accepting the force of scepticism—its durability, resilience, and continuing vitality—as reasons enough to at least consider what might follow from the possible truth of

scepticism. This involves thinking through what the tenets of a positive sceptical theory of knowledge might be like, and how these might be understood as satisfactory.

¹⁰ See *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), and almost any other work by Rorty concerning epistemology since.

¹¹ There may be a third view as well, although seemingly a minority opinion: that philosophy by the very nature of its self-reflexivity should consider recent discussions about its own questionable viability as par for the course, or even a sign of robust health.

¹² Stroud, *Significance*, 256.

¹³ Stroud, *Significance*, 1.

¹⁴ Stone, "Skepticism as a Theory of Knowledge," 527.

¹⁵ See Richard B. Miller, "Without Intuitions," *Metaphilosophy* 31, no. 3 (April 2000), 231-250.

CHAPTER 2: The Nature of Hume's Scepticism

2.1 The Humean Condition: Reflective Scepticism and Natural Belief

Although modern (characteristically global, external world) scepticism undeniably takes its shape from Descartes' discussion in *The Meditations*, it is not unusual to find Hume's formulation of the problem given more serious attention.¹ To experience the full force of modern scepticism, there are a number of reasons why Hume's presentation of scepticism is preferable to Descartes'. For one thing, focusing too much on extravagant Cartesian thought experiments (about evil deceivers or, contemporarily, Brains-in-a-Vat) can limit the perceived forcefulness of scepticism. Hume's approach seems to establish scepticism without such distractions, on the basis of nothing beyond ordinary intuitions and uncontroversial philosophical principles. Most important for my purposes, are the metaphilosophical ramifications of Hume's coupling of philosophical scepticism and naturalism. I will argue that although Hume questions the possibility of *rationaly justifying* beliefs about anything beyond the demonstrative truths of mathematics or our present sensations, he seeks to establish the force of philosophical scepticism without robbing us of *our most deeply held beliefs*. Throughout this discussion I will use the phrase "our most deeply held beliefs" as shorthand for common beliefs, such as the existence of external objects in a mind-independent world, the efficacy of cause and effect relations as a necessary connection between objects, as well as more specific beliefs, like in nature we can confidently make predictions since the future will, in most respects, and in similar circumstances, resemble the past.

Another reason to emphasize Humean scepticism, is that whereas Descartes uses doubt methodologically, Hume's final position entrenches scepticism permanently into the philosophical landscape. That is, Descartes utilizes hyperbolic doubt only to rebuild our ordinary knowledge on a foundation of certainty, while an encounter with Humean scepticism offers an enduring challenge to knowledge. The reading of Hume that I will advance, seeks to emphasize the radical shift in self-image that philosophy must endure, as a result of facing its inability to provide grounding or rational argumentation for our most deeply held beliefs. Hume's treatment, and importantly, his *attitude* toward the consequences of his view more clearly suggest the furthest-reaching consequences of scepticism for philosophy's self-image. Even though most commentators would agree with Hume that scepticism is not a viable guide to life, few have recognized that for Hume, philosophy after its encounter with scepticism is never the same. Rationalist pretensions—an obvious target of Hume's critical work—are not the only casualties in his metaphysical war.

Unlike Descartes, and the majority of contemporary commentators, there is no overcoming of scepticism in Hume. There is, rather, an explanation in psychological and naturalistic terms of why we are left with this theoretical predicament, and why it is not a practical problem. This "biperspectivalism," as Michael Williams calls it, leaves us toggling between our ordinary and philosophical outlooks without ever reconciling them. A philosophically acceptable justification is entirely lacking, according to Hume, for our belief in an external world or inductive inferences, but our lives necessitate (and function successfully when) we *act as if* induction were a completely reliable (even if not rational)

process. The task then, for Hume, is to explain *how* this reliability might arise, given that the inference leading from observed to unobserved matters of fact is not rational. In short, nature has provided numerous guarantees that despite the considerable force we may perceive in theoretical arguments for scepticism, we will continue to cling to the beliefs which are required for our everyday practices. The non-rational “operation of the mind” by which this occurs is the focus of Hume’s naturalistic theory of belief. I want to stress that this practical naturalism does not vindicate philosophy from scepticism, on Hume’s view. As we will see, the limited efficacy of philosophy is never restored to any level approximating the value that rationalists accorded it. Naturalism complements philosophy, if understood as a description or understanding of human knowledge; but philosophy never really recovers from its Pyrrhonian awakening.

Whether this discrepancy between our philosophical conclusions and our everyday beliefs is a problem, and why Hume denies that it is, will be guiding considerations in this chapter. I will summarize Hume’s position in general terms, before elaborating and defending my interpretation with textual support during the remainder of the chapter. To summarize Hume’s position: All philosophy, unavoidably and necessarily, leads to scepticism. Traditionally, philosophy aims at positive, substantive (non-sceptical) conclusions. So if pursued tenaciously enough, philosophy can result in “melancholy” and “despair.” Luckily, as human beings, we share in a natural resource, which frees us from what could otherwise be a deep and persistent anxiety about our inability to secure our most deeply held beliefs. We have instincts implanted by nature, capable of supplying the deeply held beliefs that philosophy (and reason acting alone)

cannot hope to secure. As such, our most deeply held beliefs cannot be shaken by rational argument and criticism. At least in the *Treatise* this leaves Hume feeling uncomfortable about his conclusion, which seems to amount to an anti-philosophical stance: since all attempts at philosophical reflection will naturally and inevitably lead to scepticism, in order to regain our everyday certainties, we can and should stifle our philosophical tendencies and ignore our philosophical conclusions. Hume will ultimately recommend that taking philosophy too seriously can be hazardous to one's (mental) health. If we resist, Hume tells us, Nature will force our compliance, either indirectly through rewarding our resistance with mounting melancholy, or directly, by way of our natural inability to sustain deep and difficult abstract reasoning. This proposal, endorsed by Hume as Nature's own, *enables us to* concentrate on a study of human nature, even as it is *enabled by* our reliance on our naturally supplied non-rational instincts (in the form of habits of mental association, and customary, ungrounded inferences). This demonstrates the holistic character of Hume's proposed new understanding of the nature of belief, and the limits of inquiry. The corollary of not taking the methods and assumptions of traditional philosophy too seriously, is that we must come to understand "the science of human nature." Although this will not provide an absolutely complete account, it can be developed at least to a degree sufficient to explain how we form the beliefs we all share.

It is not enough to merely ignore our philosophical tendencies. For Hume, like many others, *seems to be a philosopher despite himself*. Hume's problem is to propose limits to philosophical inquiry while avoiding the charges of laziness, arbitrariness, or simply favouring the "vulgar" view of things. And he does recognize that the traditional

aims of philosophical explanation hold a powerful grip on our imaginations. But in a round-about way, coming to understand these natural, psychological structures can help satisfy our desire for significant answers (although admittedly, the requirements and aspirations of traditional philosophical inquiry must be altered). Again, I will be emphasizing the metaphilosophical nature of Hume's critique, specifically the consequences of his philosophical scepticism and its relation to the attempted mitigation of scepticism through naturalistic explanations. Naturalism may help us better understand the nature of our beliefs, but it cannot, as is often suggested, help philosophy regain its former claim to explanatory supremacy in epistemic matters. This is recognized more fully in the *Enquiry*, where the dire tone of the *Treatise* has been replaced by a more contented acceptance of the human (and Humean) condition. So our traditional pursuit of philosophical inquiry (that is, on Hume's view, a search for ultimate, fully general explanatory principles, coupled with a demand for rational justification of our deeply held beliefs) would make us Pyrrhonian sceptics. We would repudiate all beliefs, once we realized the parity of reasons for holding one belief or its opposite. As for our most deeply held beliefs, our nature ensures that we hold beliefs, and act on them in our everyday lives, in a successful and reliable manner.

The ultimate question, of course, is whether the Humean situation is an accurate description of the human condition. Hume is credited with revealing the paradoxical status of scepticism: it is both the inevitable outcome of philosophical reflection on our epistemic situation and an impossible conclusion on which to base our everyday actions. Tracing how he reaches this two-pronged conclusion requires an overview of his

empiricism. I will try to impress upon the reader the dissociation that Hume relies on which centers on the difference between that which is rational or reasonable (that is, justified or grounded), and that which is reliable (that is, consistently worthy of our trust). I want to suggest that Hume's scepticism toward the scope and value of human reason has larger ramifications for his metaphilosophy. Not only does Hume, in a sense, show the exhaustion of empiricism (in so far as empiricist starting points lead to scepticism on a wide range of topics) but also, and more importantly, he shows the limited importance such "rational" grounds have for the seemingly reliable formulation of our most deeply held beliefs.

Hume is often considered to have presented, for the most part with approval, sceptical arguments against the senses, against causality as a relation of necessary connection between objects, against the rationality of inductive inferences, and against reason itself. There certainly are numerous sceptical arguments and strategies present in both the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*. In recent years, however, it has become common to limit, if not deny, the centrality of the role that scepticism has been commonly purported to play in Hume's view. I too will offer an interpretation of Hume that stresses his thoroughly naturalistic approach to philosophy (including most importantly his naturalistic-biological theory of belief which secures our most deeply held beliefs). As such, I am reticent to label Hume's philosophy sceptical on the whole, since in the most fundamental sense, his underlying message of naturalism is non-sceptical. However, it is important to note that although Hume's naturalism complements, and in a sense mitigates, his scepticism, philosophy left to its own (traditional) devices, on his view, will

lead to absolute scepticism. The positive side of his view aims to explain how and why we can rely on our most deeply held beliefs, even though we cannot rationally justify them—but importantly, this is not a vindication of philosophy proper. It is an additional feature of Hume’s view that is theoretically separable from his underlying scepticism. Hume is undoubtedly thoroughly sceptical about the power of, and importance of, human reason and rational argument to our most deeply held beliefs. However, the naturalism—which is so important to a balanced understanding of Hume as a philosopher—should not cloud our understanding of his philosophical and metaphilosophical scepticism. I will argue that Hume’s enduring importance, although rarely recognized as such, is his radical critique of the pretensions of almost all philosophy and argument.

Keeping in mind that my ultimate goal is to tease out the criteria of satisfaction that are present in his metaphilosophical commitments, I will argue that the cornerstones of Hume’s view are (a) that the first step toward re-evaluating philosophy and science is coming to a proper understanding of human nature; (b) his insistence that rationalist assumptions can be profitably abandoned; that (c) empiricist principles lead inevitably to scepticism, and (d) that this leads to a crisis in philosophy; and finally, (e) that a naturalistic approach to philosophy is the best available, although even this fails to satisfy the traditional aspirations and requirements set out by his philosophical predecessors. A specifically troubling part of Hume’s analysis is his insistence that there can be no non-circular justification for something as seemingly fundamental to human existence as making predictions about future natural events. Hume’s own reaction toward the radically

revisionary consequences of his project will be shown to change from the “melancholy” and “despair”² of the *Treatise* to a more comfortable acceptance of this same “whimsical condition”³ in the *Enquiry*. It is not that Hume moves closer to achieving what he understands to be the traditional aspiration of epistemology; it’s that he becomes convinced that no philosophical theory could supply what has been traditionally sought. His contentment, then, may lie in his conviction that his system provides all that can be asked of it, or any other description of human knowledge. My overall interpretation includes emphasizing the controversial stance that reason has a quite limited role in our mental lives, and that the parts of our nature that we share with the rest of the animal kingdom (instincts, natural beliefs) commonly do the work we have traditionally supposed was being done by rational argument. Also, I stress the differences and similarities between Hume’s major works to trace the effect of Hume’s metaphilosophical views on his final position. In the final analysis, the effect of Hume’s overall program has far-reaching consequences for the scope and self-image of philosophy. Having concluded this general overview, I will move on to flesh out the account with a more text-centered approach.

2.2 Hume’s Epistemology and the Foundation of His Scepticism

Hume’s empiricism amounts to rigorously maintaining the thesis that experience is the source of all knowledge concerning “matters of fact and real existence.” Excluding only purely conceptual knowledge (such as pure mathematics), Hume argues that experience is a necessary originator of all of our beliefs. The core distinction underlying this position concerns our “perceptions,” which divide up into “impressions” and “ideas.”

The broad category of perceptions encompasses “any conscious state whatsoever.”⁴ Impressions include not only what we might now call sense data, but also passions and emotions. Impressions are primary; they are prior to ideas, insofar as they provide the raw material for them. As such, all of our ideas must be ultimately traceable to a source impression.⁵ Impressions, then, are the immediate feelings of either our passions, or our (apparent) interaction with external objects; ideas arise from reflection on passions formerly felt, or on “an object which is not [currently] present.”⁶

Hume puts forth his general empiricist principle in italics: “*That all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv’d from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.*” This first basic principle is fundamental to Hume’s entire system. Georges Dicker outlines its two tenets as follows. To count as an idea means to be either “(a) derived from a corresponding impression, or (b) composed of simpler ideas, each of which is derived from a corresponding impression.”⁷ Closely coupled with this, and the most significant consequence of this principle, is Hume’s “test for meaning.” This test, most generally, guards against the abstract and metaphysical ideas of philosophers. It is applied in the following way: “When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as it is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?*”⁸ To fail to be able to trace an idea to a source impression, is for Hume, evidence that the idea is defective.⁹ Armed with this test (which coupled with his basic principle of empiricism, he takes to be decisive), Hume proceeds to treat and dismiss traditionally troublesome philosophical concepts.¹⁰

A second crucial distinction is added to Hume's empiricism in the *Enquiry*. It divides types of knowledge into a mutually exclusive and exhaustive classification between "relations of ideas" (roughly analytic statements, such as $2+2=4$, which can be known without reference to experience) and "matters of fact" (the bulk of knowledge claims, which require that knowers consult experience to determine a proposition's truth or falsity).¹¹ The former are "either intuitively or demonstratively certain," while the latter admit of "probable" proof only. The truth of matters of fact is always contingent, and therefore cannot be known a priori. This also means that experience is required to help determine what is or is not the case. It is important to recognize that Hume is not denying here the knowability in principle of matters of fact. Experience can supply information about, say, the result of two billiard balls colliding. He is insisting, rather, only on the unknowability of any matter of fact by means of a priori reasoning. His investigations in the *Enquiry* always revolve around this crucial distinction between propositions "discoverable by the mere operation of thought," and those which require a familiarity with experience. Notably, it serves as another test by which Hume can discern how the truth or falsity of a purported idea should be investigated.

This test (which primarily shows whether experience is necessary to determine truth or falsity in a particular case) rests on the following claim: "The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction [...]."¹² In short, without the aid of experience, we can know that the negation of $2+2=4$ implies a contradiction, whereas the negation of the proposition "The sun will rise tomorrow," is not a contradiction, and would require us to consult experience to determine its truth

value. Crucially, this test relies on a controversial premise about the relation between conceivability, contradiction, and possibility.¹³ For Hume, a proposition that is “demonstrably false [...] would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind.”¹⁴ That is, one could never forcefully imagine (or entertain the thought of, or believe in the existence of) a table that is at the same time and in the same place, both brown and not brown. The importance of this for my reading, is that Hume is not here tying ontological possibilities to the power of the human mind. The test that Hume is offering is limited to providing information about whether an item under our consideration is properly subject to conceptual analysis, or requires an appeal to experience. On this topic, Hume remains at all times concerned with psychological, rather than logical, considerations.

Hume next introduces the question which eventually drives him to the conclusion that reason is incapable of supplying us, and justifying to its own standards of rationality, our most deeply held beliefs: “It may therefore, be a subject worthy of curiosity, to enquire what is the nature of that evidence which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of the senses, or the records of our memory.”¹⁵ To motivate this seemingly innocuous line of enquiry, Hume adds that its utility may lie simply in “destroying that implicit faith and security” we have in our most deeply held beliefs. Of course, it is possible that this investigation will yield adequate, rational support for our most deeply held beliefs, that is, provide the rational substantiation for the claims we most often make without considering their evidence. His approach, then, will aim to become aware, and perhaps critical, of the evidence we tacitly

assume to support such beliefs as the existence of the external world, or the rationality of inductive inferences. Hume contends that although frequently overlooked in the past, this approach may lead to a more “full and satisfactory” account than the one traditionally canvassed. To anticipate, Hume will conclude that he has provided a more “satisfactory” account of the evidence we must rely on to generate our most deeply held beliefs, but notoriously, his account favours brute natural principles as their source, as opposed to any rational arguments that could be attributable to reason. This anti-rationalist point should not obscure the fact that on Hume’s view, the nature of all philosophy is ultimately deficient when compared against traditional argumentative standards (such as the requirement of non-circularity, and the need to substantiate starting points). His own view is not presented as immune to the broad criticisms he is canvassing against the nature of philosophical arguments in general.

Hume’s reasoning about how we might secure our belief in “any real existence and matter of fact” is not only central to Section IV of the *Enquiry*, “Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding,” but also to the overall position he adopts. As such, it will be outlined in detail. Hume begins this argument with the claim that “[a]ll reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of *Cause and Effect*.”¹⁶ He enumerates a few examples, all of which aim to show that in order to hold a belief about something which is not immediately present to our senses, we must infer it from some “present fact.” For instance, your belief that a friend of yours is in France gains its strength from its supposed connection to the fact that you just received a letter from her postmarked in France, and that she had previously told you of her

intention to travel there. So your belief that she is now in France is inferred from two other, more immediate facts, one sensory in nature, and one derived from memory. These present facts, of course, would not help support your currently held belief about her whereabouts, if not for a further supposition, namely, that the letter and your past conversation are somehow connected in a causally relevant way. Hume's blanket contention is that an examination of *any* belief we hold about matters of fact (except those which are directly tied "to the present testimony of the sense, or the records of memory") will reveal that they are all "of the same nature," that is, dependent on the supposed necessity of cause and effect relations.

So a sub-question arises. If we are to understand the nature of our evidence for beliefs about unobserved matters of fact, we must inquire first into our understanding of the nature of cause and effect relations. Following the method outlined above, Hume will apply the test (commonly known as "Hume's fork") to determine whether our knowledge of cause and effect relations can be known a priori (as a "relation of ideas") or only with the aid of experience ("matter of fact."). First, Hume deals with the possibility that cause and effect relations can be understood by reason alone. He rejects this outright, offering the following consideration: "Adam, though his rational faculties be supposed, at the very first, entirely perfect, could not have inferred from the fluidity and transparency of water that it would suffocate him, or from the light and warmth of fire that it would consume him."¹⁷ Causes and effects are not discoverable by any mere mental manipulation of the sensory information available to us.

But if we are to examine the cause and effect relation as a matter of fact, we must apply the further test. Can the contrary of 'C causes E' be asserted without contradiction? Indeed, Hume concludes, for every proposition, 'C causes E,' '~C causes E' or 'C causes ~E' is entirely conceivable without contradiction. Causation, then, on Hume's account, cannot be an a priori relation. Its truth or falsity can only be discovered with reference to experience. Hume suggests that we are ready to admit this, where the effects are not significantly similar to those found most commonly in nature, or when they seem to depend on "an intricate machinery or secret structure of parts."¹⁸ But it seems otherwise with events that are less complex, or with which we have been aware since our youth. Hume insists that this recognition of our reliance on experience to discern causes and effects must be extended to cover all beliefs about matters of fact and "real existence." The resistance people feel to extending this principle to cover all events is explainable by the same principle that leads people to mistake the constant conjunction of events as a necessary connection between them in the first place: custom. "Such is the influence of custom," Hume suggests, "that, where it is strongest, it not only covers our natural ignorance, but even conceals itself [...]."¹⁹

To establish that Reason could never discover a cause or an effect without recourse to experience, Hume asks us to imagine being presented with an object or event—any at all—and to explain how the mind could go about determining either what came before or what would follow. Once again, Hume is relying on a negative argument—a sort of challenge to provide a counter example to prove him wrong. Hume concludes that any attempt based purely on Reason must fail, and for this reason: since in

every case, “the effect is totally different from the cause.”²⁰ Unlike many of his rationalist predecessors, Hume is emphasizing that an examination of cause cannot lead to the discovery of the effect, and vice versa. When Hume turns next to how it might be that cause and effect relations may be merely matters of fact, discoverable only with the aid of experience, his discussion merges seamlessly into his concerns about the rationality of induction. First, I will outline an abridged version of the argument as it appears in the *Treatise*.

Hume does not approach phenomena with the aim of explaining their ultimate principles (since he claims this to be utterly beyond human capacities). He wants, rather, to describe how it is that we confidently hold beliefs that nonetheless lack rational justification. The idea of causation, Hume contends, might arise as a result of the three features common to situations where we impute the necessary connection of causation: contiguity, succession, and constant conjunction. Contiguity covers the fact that only objects or events that are closely related in space and time are assumed to be causally connected. Succession simply means that, barring a few exceptions, we impute causation to objects or events when the effect follows the cause. However, it is evident that some objects or events are contiguous and follow in succession, which are nonetheless not believed to be causally related.

A closer examination of constant conjunction is in order. Against the common reading of Hume as simply *identifying* constant conjunction with causality, Hume himself states that this would not be enough to explain *the necessity we feel* in making causal judgments. Recall that Hume is not interested in explaining ultimate principles; he only

wants to explain how creatures like us come to believe certain key ideas that have traditionally (and mistakenly on Hume's view) been attributed to Reason and rational argument. Even where it is not commonly assumed that a belief originates through rational argument, it is held as a condition of adequacy (or satisfaction) that any reasonable belief be capable of rational justification after the fact. Hume's denial of this leads him to continue the analysis toward "natural" (here meaning non-rational) as opposed to "philosophical relations." Although the relation of constant conjunction is crucial to Hume's analysis of causation, it is far from the last word:

We may now see the advantage of quitting the direct survey of this relation, in order to discover the nature of that *necessary connexion*, which makes so essential a part of it. There are hopes that by this means we may at last arrive at our propos'd end; tho' to tell the truth, this new-discover'd relation of a constant conjunction seems to advance us but very little in our way.²¹

Although Hume reiterates here that he has not tried to "direct[ly] survey" causation, it would be easy to mistake what he has presented as an answer to that old question: What is the nature of causation? So contrary to the common misconception, Hume's account of causation does not rest after pointing out the constant conjunction of objects that we mistakenly call causally (that is, necessarily) connected. A few lines later, he continues:

From the mere repetition of many past impressions, even to infinity, there never will arise any new original idea, such as that of necessary connexion; [...] as it wou'd be folly to despair too soon, we shall continue the thread of our discourse; and having found, that after the discovery of the constant conjunction of any objects, we always draw an inference from one object to another, we shall now examine the nature of that inference, and of the transition from the impression to the idea. Perhaps 'twill appear in the end, that the necessary connexion depends on the inference, instead of the inference's depending on the necessary connexion.²²

First, Hume notes that all we have to go on are the three features of our experience mentioned earlier: contiguity, succession, and constant conjunction. But those alone were seen to fail to capture the essential aspect of necessary connection. Without the necessary connection that apparently holds between causally related objects, causation would not be very interesting, nor could it be the foundation of all of our action—which Hume agrees with rationalists, it must be. Hume then rejects the suggestion that we should stop our investigation here and settle for the despair attending to our failure to secure a explanation of how we understand causality. Here is an important instance of Hume’s confusing use of “inference” to mean a natural transition from one idea to another or from an impression to an idea, and not a reasoned step in a rational argument. Finally, Hume anticipates in this passage the positive half of his analysis (to be taken up in the following section), which will suggest that necessity, in matters of causality, is not logical but natural, not merely the result of a relation holding between objects, but a feature of our minds that associates an object or event with what has customarily followed it in the past. This will take us further toward the problem of induction, and Hume’s naturalistic solution to how and why we trust our non-rational “inferences.”

This is also why Hume is generally considered to be a sceptic. He concedes at least this much: Scepticism is the inevitable outcome of philosophical reflection, and it is only a matter of natural, psychological human propensities, which are required for practical purposes that we do not live that truth. When reason acts alone, apart from the constraints of action and life, it will inevitably end stymied by a sceptical conclusion. The question becomes whether anything more than human psychology prevent us from

having to live the sceptical conclusion. What really matters is Hume's avowal of what leads us to act *as if* cause and effect processes are known to be certain and regular. It is not by any a priori reasoning at all, but rather as a result of our customary (as opposed to reasoned) inferences that lead us from the "constant conjunction" of "causes" with their "effects" to suppose that they are related in some metaphysically interesting way. "[E]ven after we have experience of the operations of cause and effect, our conclusions from that experience are not founded on reasoning, or any process of the understanding."²³

The problem, then, is to understand how predictive propositions, such as 'the sun will rise tomorrow,' can be justified. "It may, therefore," Hume suggests:

be a subject worthy of curiosity to inquire what is the nature of that evidence which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact beyond the present testimony of our senses or the records of our memory.²⁴

How are we to overcome this solipsism of the present moment? Hume suggests that something like a principle of the uniformity of nature (henceforth PUN) is always assumed in our reasoning. But just as a further examination of the foundations of our use of cause and effect revealed a lack of justification, so too does the investigation into the PUN. Cause and effect relations were seen to be matters of fact, and it was found that past experience alone could not determine our right to project cause and effect relations into the future. Likewise, with induction (to be dealt with in the following section), which seems in need of a further premise to make the inference valid. Despite this (philosophical) lack, and since "[n]ature is always too strong for principle,"²⁵ we are inclined by "custom," "habit," and natural "instinct" to follow our inferences regarding induction and cause and effect.

Recall that all objects of knowledge, if they are not simply necessarily true or false conceptually, require an appeal to experience to determine their truth or falsity. Whether something is properly classified as a “matter of fact” can be known by checking if the negation of a claim is logically possible or not. If a negation of a proposition is incoherent (such as $\sim[2+2=4]$) then it is a relation of ideas; otherwise, the negation of a proposition is at least intelligible (say, that the sun will not rise tomorrow). As outlined in the previous section, Hume challenged anyone to provide a deductive argument to show that we can proceed from knowledge about past experiences to a prediction of a future state (which would also be necessary for to assert a general causal law).²⁶

There is a missing premise, or “medium,” Hume suggests, which he proposes is the PUN, roughly that in the course of nature “the future will resemble the past.” This general premise can connect the steps of our inference. But, as always, we must ask, ‘how can this be known to be true?’ The negation of the proposition is at least intelligible (i.e. the course of nature could change: the next time two billiard balls hit they may communicate no motion) so this PUN is certainly only a matter of fact. Since it is derived only from past experience however, it cannot possibly provide the bridge needed in our inference, for it is clearly taking us in a very short circle. Hume concludes that there is no satisfactory (non-circular) justification for inductive reasoning. And deductive or demonstrative reasoning, which is very limited in scope, can never provide help in dealing with these matters of fact. His conclusions are that “all inferences from experience, therefore, are effects of custom, not reasoning,” and that it is custom, and not reason (as philosophers have traditionally thought), “that is the great guide of human

life.”²⁷ Hume is clear to what extent this explanation in terms of natural, human psychological tendencies can take us:

By employing that word [custom], we pretend not to have given the ultimate reason of such a propensity. We only point out a principle of human nature, which is universally acknowledged, and which is well known by its effects.

For Hume, this is where, to use Wittgenstein’s famous phrase, justification and explanation must “come to an end.” Hume continues:

Perhaps we can push our inquiries no farther, or pretend to give the cause of this cause; but must rest contented with it as the ultimate principle, which we can assign, of all our conclusions from experience. It is sufficient satisfaction, that we can go so far [...].”²⁸

So here we have a stark admission: our confidence in future predictions cannot be justified by any appeal to non-circular rational justification. Since it does not seem to even occur to Hume to consider permitting circular justifications and still considering them fully rational, he is left to declare induction a non-rational process. In subsequent chapters, I will return to the issue of circularity in epistemology and its relation to the question of scepticism in contemporary discussions.

It seems beyond question that one of Hume’s persistent philosophical targets was the elimination of rationalist metaphysics (including understanding causality as a necessary connection between objects). He deemed rationalism both dogmatic and dangerous (especially insofar as it was used to support, and was supported by, traditional theology). But, importantly, it was not that Hume was at pains to permanently call into question our most deeply held beliefs. By showing that causality is not an external relation holding between objects, he is not trying to reason us out of holding those beliefs. To the contrary, he is showing that philosophical reflection will show that we

have no arguments to justify our reliance on causal reasoning or predictions based on induction. But where traditional metaphysicians seek to treat our most deeply held beliefs as a matter of rational inquiry, Hume aims to show that such matters are incapable of reasoned support. Nevertheless, we are “justified” in another sense, but one which stems from our natural endowment that we share with animals. The higher order cognitive operations more often than not confuse, rather than illuminate, the nature of being human. It is not that our belief in, say, the existence of external objects is in jeopardy, but only that Reason acting alone could never secure or justify such a belief. As such, John Laird’s succinct formulation of what Hume “*meant by scepticism*” proves accurate. Scepticism arises from “a doubt *based upon intellectual difficulties*.”²⁹ In the next section, I will turn to a closer examination of why such “intellectual difficulties” do not lead Hume to make full-fledged sceptical claims, regarding the necessity of causality or the existence of material bodies. It is only Hume’s thoroughly naturalistic theory of belief that saves him from the scepticism that would otherwise result from the “intellectual difficulties” associated with justifying beliefs epistemically. Thus, we arrive at what I will call a “provisional respect” for scepticism. Generally, this position is the result of Hume’s critique of the purported epistemological foundation of our fundamental beliefs in, for instance, the existence of an external world or the necessary connection between cause and effect. The respect arises from the contention, central to Hume’s view, that all attempts to reflect philosophically on our most deeply held beliefs lead to theoretical scepticism: “Thus the observation of human blindness and weakness is the result of all philosophy, and meets us at every turn, in spite of our endeavours to elude and avoid

it.”³⁰ Importantly, if we resist Hume’s naturalistic view of belief formation (or similar contemporary versions), we are still faced with his scepticism-inducing critiques. So this position of provisional respect for scepticism admits the strength of sceptical challenges on at least some conceptions of philosophy.

The above discussion of Hume’s stage-setting for the “sceptical” conclusion concerning the foundation of cause and effect relations may seem curiously sterile compared with the weighty issue of whether we can secure our belief that an external world of mind-independent objects exists. But it is important to note that Hume’s treatment of external world scepticism (which he couches in terms of “whether there be material body”) never even gets off the ground. To contextualize, the following passage, which opens the section in the *Treatise*, “Of scepticism with regard to the senses,” comes immediately after Hume’s attempt to show that reason, left to its own devices, will annihilate itself. According to that argument, reason acting alone, will prove a failure in any attempt to secure certainty in its judgments (providing probabilistic assurance at best.) and then, in an attempt to justify itself, will be forced in the direction of infinite regress, where “the declining probability that results from reiterated calculations” will finally reduce all knowledge and belief to nothing. (I will omit discussion of this argument, not only because it is notoriously weak, but also since the details of this matter are far less important to my purpose than the conclusion Hume draws.)³¹ The other candidate that Hume considers as a possible source for justifying our belief in the external world is the senses.³² In brief, there are standard considerations, known since antiquity, about visual illusions arising from physical manipulation of our eyes, or the

distance of the objects we observe. Various arguments from illusion and error are sufficient to dismiss the senses as the legitimating source of our belief in external objects.

Consider this passage, which is revealing of Hume's overall approach:

We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* But 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point which we must take for granted in all our reasonings.³³

What could Hume possibly mean by saying that "we must take for granted" the existence of an external, material, mind-independent world "in all our reasonings"? One possibility could be that the consideration is self-evident or intuitively certain. Of course, the entire weight of Hume's arguments to this point explicitly denounces that possibility. Another possibility could be strictly practical, as supported by a *reductio* starting with the opposite claim, namely that we could do without this basic belief. In other words, failure to assume it would lead to a complete suspension of belief and action, and this is patently absurd: this neither does actually happen, nor could it, according to Hume. And kept on this strictly theoretical level, this amounts to what Michael Williams has called "bluff pragmatism." Basically, such a position would hold that since we cannot accept the conclusion (that we can do without the belief in the external world), we need not argue against it. We can therefore assume it, if only for practical reasons. Putting it another way, we need not worry about responding to scepticism since it is ultimately inefficacious concerning our most deeply held beliefs anyway.³⁴ M. J. Ferreira, for one, complains of this tendency to see "Hume's 'naturalism' [...] as only an extended pragmatic mitigation of scepticism." She seeks to locate the interpretive error in Hume's under appreciated threefold distinction between knowledge, probability, and proof.³⁵ But

more simply, the error in ascribing this position to Hume is that it would suggest that, on the one hand, Hume is denying the force of all reasoned argument to secure our most deeply held beliefs, while accepting, on the other, a certain kind of theoretical argument (motivated by pragmatic or prudential reasoning), on the other.³⁶ This inconsistency is not to be found in Hume's "solution" to answering the question of how we acquire and secure our most deeply held beliefs.

Just prior to the passage quoted above, Hume writes:

Nature has not left this [belief in the existence of "material body"] to chance, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations.³⁷

This should be considered in light of his earlier contention that "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel."³⁸

We now have an indication of how Hume's thoroughly naturalistic theory of belief, driven by custom and natural instincts, will serve to secure our most deeply held beliefs. It is not, as might be mistakenly inferred from the phrase "we must take for granted," that we convince ourselves of its necessity through arguments (pragmatic or otherwise) of any kind. Long before we can come to grasp the subtle, philosophical arguments that lead to scepticism, our naturally inherited instincts and habits of mind will have ensured that we could never vividly entertain the possibility of calling our most deeply held beliefs into question.

The next step in developing this reading of Hume will be to examine how he develops this professed way around scepticism (Chapter 2.3). I agree in general, although not in detail, with Kemp Smith, who suggests that "Hume's [...] naturalistic view of

reason is a new theory of belief.”³⁹ In other words, our deeply held beliefs are non-epistemic, insofar as belief about the existence of an external, material, mind-independent world “is not caused by knowledge but precedes it, and as it is not caused by knowledge it is not destroyed by doubt.”⁴⁰ Following that, I will examine how the balance between scepticism and naturalism is interconnected with Hume’s wider conception of the nature, value, and limits of philosophy (Chapter 2.5).

2.3 Naturalism and Insulation

It is now commonplace for commentators to situate Hume as a philosopher committed to both scepticism and naturalism.⁴¹ It should be stressed that these two positions are not opposed, but rather, complimentary. What scepticism seems to rob us of (belief in causation as necessary connection, reliance on inductive inferences as a rationally justified process, and even knowledge of the external world) is restored through a naturalistic explanation of psychological necessity and human habit. Hume, it would seem, was comfortable with what others have viewed as the diagnosis of a predicament. Comfortable, at least insofar as (1) he thought his account was correct, and given this, (2) living this dual existence, as *we all already do*, need not pose problems in any area of our lives. Unless, of course, we cannot overcome our rationalist philosophical pretensions to secure a single, rational outlook on nature.

The significance of (2) should be considered further. Often philosophers react as if the triumph of scepticism at a theoretical level will lead to some sort of disaster. The temptation that we are all liable to fall into, it would seem, is to overemphasize the importance of philosophy. That is, we proceed as if a failure to secure these beliefs by

non-circular rational justifications might lead to doxastic chaos. But Hume's genius can be located, in part, by his unyielding focus on the fact that *since* we all share in these unshakeable beliefs, the task is to explain *how* and *why* this is so. It is not as if philosophy is on a mission to secure these beliefs for future generations, or that if we discover the impossibility of rationally supporting them, that our most deeply held beliefs might vanish with this letdown. The value of philosophy, which is at least secondary to our practical lives, cannot lie in securing our most deeply held beliefs. As Hume puts it, "Nature has [...] doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations."⁴² The overriding concern that I want to stress in this section is that even though Hume calls into question our rational justification for our most deeply held beliefs, it is not because he has first found them unreliable. To the contrary, we all rely on, and with considerable success,⁴³ inferences from cause to effect. The only thing in question is the *nature* of this inference. That this "inference" turns out to be non-rational, should not lead to an alarm call. This "discovery," if it may be called that, should not and *cannot* alter the way we form and maintain beliefs anyway. What is reasonable (in a loose sense) is not necessarily, for Hume, to follow the dictates of Reason. Sometimes, being reasonable is simply submitting to our non-rational natures.

The now-familiar account of Hume as *both* a sceptic and naturalist grew out of, in large part, the critical attention paid to Norman Kemp Smith's interpretation of Hume as *primarily* a naturalist.⁴⁴ The prevalent view prior to Kemp Smith's was simply that Hume was a thorough-going sceptic whose important contribution to the empiricist tradition was to show its bankruptcy and utter exhaustion. T.H. Green's once-influential reading

represents Hume as the logical termination of empiricist principles through a sort of unwitting *reductio*. This view has been all but abandoned by contemporary Hume scholars, and for good reasons.⁴⁵ Broadly speaking, such an interpretation ignores the constructive side of Hume's project. Some commentators still adhere to this interpretation, but the trend among Hume scholars (since Kemp Smith's work), has been toward balancing the negative and constructive aspects of Hume's view. I will outline what is generally meant by the constructive or naturalistic side of Hume's view, and show how it more than makes up for his sceptical denials.

Before examining the role of naturalism in Hume's philosophy, it would help to become more clear about what is meant by that term. It is not uncommon for discussions of contemporary naturalism to begin with a lament for the multiple, conflicting, and sometimes only loosely-related meanings ascribed contemporarily to the position of naturalism.⁴⁶ Hume himself recognized the "ambiguous and equivocal" meanings of what is called natural.⁴⁷ One distinct sense of the term takes its shape simply as the term of opposition to supernaturalism. On this usage, one's explanation is naturalistic if and only if (a) it does not appeal to supernatural entities or forces, and (b) perhaps, as a more strict clause, if it also sets as a criteria of satisfaction, that any adequate explanation must not appeal to anything outside the realm of the natural. A related sense of naturalism, then, and one suggested by this other sense, is that an explanation would do well to be presented in terms and concepts amenable to current standards in the physical sciences. This meaning is closer to the contemporary one, often associated with W.V.O. Quine and the naturalized epistemology movement.⁴⁸ A third sense of naturalism, also endorsed by

Hume, is well formulated by B. Winters, as “a general view that runs through all of his philosophy: what is most natural to us is best and most agreeable.”⁴⁹ These three distinct but related senses of naturalism are contained in what I consider Humean naturalism.

Recall what I introduced in the last section as Hume’s *provisional respect* for the sceptical challenge. Briefly, this means that Reason acting alone will lead us to a total, Pyrrhonian suspension of belief, which will in turn lead us to confusion and inaction. More plainly, it will render us, in one sense, inhuman. This is because, as we saw for Hume, holding and acting on beliefs are as requisite to human nature as breathing or feeling. This partial endorsement of the force of scepticism hardly commits one to relinquishing all hope of a successful, positive account of what justifies our beliefs. The other leading candidate that might be responsible for securing our most deeply held beliefs, experience, would also fail if not for the “fortunate” natural endowment that ensures “automatic responses [belief-formation] to particular forms of experience.”⁵⁰ So although this *provisional respect* for sceptical arguments acknowledges the force of the challenge, it is only a single aspect of Hume’s overall view. Natural instincts and customary principles of mental association are, like our most deeply held belief in general, non-epistemic. That is, they are neither reliant on the traditional requirement that rational justification is a necessary condition of knowledge, nor are they susceptible to criticism from Reason.

It is sometimes said that the upshot of balancing Hume’s scepticism with naturalism is that our ordinary beliefs and practices may be seen as immune to, or insulated from, the spreading terror of scepticism. Any form of an “insulation thesis” in

this respect aims to carve out territory safe from the spreading effects of Pyrrhonian scepticism. The very idea of desiring, or even being able, to “insulate” scepticism from the rest of our lives is said to be a thoroughly modern development in scepticism.⁵¹ Leaving aside the historical question, I want to suggest that it makes little sense to talk of Hume as being either in favour of, or against, the aim of insulating our everyday beliefs from the effects of scepticism. For unlike others who must try to insulate parts of their epistemic inventory (certain beliefs, justifications for practices, etc.), Hume’s account of belief starts from the recognition that fundamental beliefs, say, about the existence of a material world, are the result of natural features of our mental endowment. They are non-epistemic beliefs, independent of and unrelated to, rational arguments that might be put forward afterward to support them. The evidence for them, if we can call it that, is derived not from reason, or even experience, properly speaking, but rather from an integral part of our natural inheritance.

It is worth noting here that at least one influential commentator has made the understandable mistake of interpreting this aspect of Hume’s view as an endorsement of “innate ideas.” Laird claims there is “a great, if not an insuperable difficulty in Hume’s contention in the form in which he stated it.” In short, if our most deeply held beliefs are implanted “antecedent to experience” then “Hume’s proper conclusion should therefore have been some doctrine of innate ideas [...]”⁵² And indeed, Hume acknowledges that his view is like “some doctrine of innate ideas,” but since it is significantly different from what the tradition (especially Locke) held that to be, it is more confusing than helpful to insist on this point. As Hume explains in a lengthy footnote at the close of Section II of

the *Enquiry* the reason why Locke's treatment of innate ideas falters is that he follows rationalists in not distinguishing between impressions and ideas. Consider portions of Hume's footnote that highlight the controversy:

For what is meant by *innate*? If innate be equivalent to natural, then all the perceptions and ideas of the mind must be allowed to be innate or natural, in whatever sense we take that latter word, whether in opposition to what is uncommon, artificial or miraculous. If by innate be meant, contemporary to our birth, the dispute seems to be frivolous; nor is it worth while to enquire at what time thinking begins, whether before, at, or after our birth. [...].

But admitting these terms, *impressions* and *ideas*, in the sense above explained, and understanding by *innate*, what is original or copied from no precedent perception, then may we assert that all our impressions are innate, and our ideas not innate.⁵³

Once it is recognized that each use of "or" in the above passage is meant inclusively, not exclusively, it becomes clear that Hume cannot be said to subscribe to anything approximating what is traditionally meant by innate ideas. For even though our most deeply held beliefs are the result of the imagination and mental principles of association (namely causation) implanted by Nature, none of these features of our natural endowment supplies any substantive piece of knowledge. It is only how these features of human nature interact with impressions that gives rise to our most deeply held beliefs. The sense of innate that Hume comes to accept above is fundamentally unable to provide human beings with substantive, a priori knowledge in the way that rationalists contend.

So is this point about innate ideas just another way of stressing that Hume's view, which is driven by empiricist principles, is distinct from, and opposed to, rationalism? I think it would be an oversight to conclude merely this. For Hume's understanding of ideas is not only contrary to the received rationalist view, but when coupled with his naturalistic theory of belief adds a further, novel dimension to his epistemology. Namely,

his naturalistic theory of belief coupled with his clarification of how it differs from innate ideas, combine to advocate the radical conclusion that *our most deeply held beliefs are not properly classified as knowledge at all*. The primary reason for this is not, as might be suspected, that they are not derived from impressions (as Hume stipulates all meaningful ideas must be). Beliefs are generated, rather, when data from our experience is acted on by natural instincts in our shared human nature, and aided further by our imagination. The “innate” human endowment does not and could not provide a single idea (that is, could not advance at all past Locke’s initial state of “tabula rasa”) without first acquiring experience. On the other hand, without the essential role played by the imagination and our natural instincts, we could never form any of our most deeply held beliefs either. So while there is an important element of “innatism” in Hume’s view, (in so far as human nature provides customary habits of association necessary to formulate the beliefs we hold) it is radically distinct from what is commonly known as “innate ideas.” But this does not explain Hume’s reticence to call our most deeply held beliefs knowledge. The actual reason why our most deeply held beliefs are not properly considered knowledge is that they cannot be justified by rational argument (as is traditionally required). “Fortunately,” as Hume is quick to point out, nature did not leave such important matters to chance. Nor is it trusted to Reason or our fallible faculties. It is rather a part of our natural endowment that when confronted with certain repetitive experiences of objects that are constantly conjoined, our imagination customarily transfers the vivacity of our impression of the first object (the cause) onto the idea of the second (the effect).

Having just rejected rival conceptions of how Hume understands the nature of belief and belief formation, I will now offer my positive interpretation. I will be brief, as the essential elements of my reading have been introduced in the above sections of this chapter. At the outset, it should be noted that Hume recognized the centrality of his theory of belief for his wider account. Evidence for this comes in the appendix added to the *Treatise*, which he intended to amplify and clarify certain key sections. He dedicates over half of it to a further discussion of what properly constitutes belief. There he stresses again that belief is linked more to a vivacity of feeling than any rational deliberation or argument.

The characteristic element in Kemp Smith's reading of Hume emphasizes "the determining factor in Hume's philosophy" to be "the establishment of a purely naturalistic conception of human nature by the thorough subordination of reason to feeling and instinct."⁵⁴ Although this is technically accurate, Kemp Smith's formulation invites the derisive knee-jerk reaction of many philosophers, since it characterizes the relationship between instinct and reason as one of "thorough subordination." Rhetorically this seems to suggest a reversal of the formerly held hierarchy of reason above all else (including instinct and feeling). But, crucially, this purported former hierarchy, on Hume's account, was only *a long-standing mistake*. Hume is not claiming to have prescribed anything not already suggested (and virtually guaranteed) by Nature. His infamous remark that "Reason is, and only ought to be the slave of the passions"⁵⁵ is the *result* of his theory of belief, not an arbitrary, a priori proclamation that motivates his account.

After a brief review, I will go over the positive, naturalistic solution to the sceptical concerns raised in the previous section. First, consider our belief in both the “distinct” and “continu’d” existence of objects. To take a step back, let’s review why reason or the senses cannot perform this role. It is much easier to see why the senses cannot be trusted. If our perceptions were identical to the objects (as the vulgar suppose) then an object unperceived may not be either “distinct” or “continu’d” since our perception of it is certainly not. But if our image of an object is not the same as the object itself (as philosophers would have it), then we have opened up the sceptical divide between an internal world of perceptions and an outer world of objects. Neither way of considering the nature of our sense data (as identical with objects, or as representations of objects) can generate our justified belief in a world of external, independent objects.

Before examining Reason as the other candidate, Hume offers this intriguing consideration:

whatever convincing arguments philosophers may fancy they can produce to establish the belief of objects independent of the mind, ’tis obvious these arguments are known but to very few, and that ’tis not by them, that children, peasants and the greatest part of mankind are induc’d to attribute objects to some impressions, and deny them to others.

In short, even if reasoned arguments could be produced to secure our most deeply held beliefs (and Hume denies this), this would not answer how “the greatest part of mankind” acquires or satisfies themselves of these beliefs. If the arguments are simple, Hume should be able to produce them readily. He cannot. If they are subtle and abstract, then children and the philosophically unsophisticated would be forever without assurance concerning these core beliefs. But this, obviously, is not the case. This is why Hume

insists at the outset that our explanation (which is more accurately, a description on his view) must concern “the *causes* which induce us to believe in the existence of body,”⁵⁶ and not the ultimate features of reality. Animals, according to Hume, obviously “reason” in the same way humans do about the permanent and distinct existence of material bodies. Any account of our most deeply held beliefs then, should be able to account for this commonality between human beings and beasts. Thus, advanced rational operations seem a most unlikely source for the origin of, or continued trust in, these beliefs.

If it is not the senses or Reason which originate and sustain our belief in external, independent objects, it can only be, according to Hume, the work of the imagination. Since “all impressions are internal and perishing existences” (according to Hume’s empirical assumptions), there must be something else that distinguishes our internal, fleeting impressions (of reflection), from those impressions (of sensation) to which we impute a separate existence. After dismissing various vulgar views, Hume again suggests (as we saw with causation) that our most fruitful investigation will come from enumerating and analyzing the common features of our experience. In this case, we find that impressions that we deem to be derived from independent objects, have in common only their “peculiar *constancy*” and their “coherence.”⁵⁷ Here, his analysis links up with that of causation, which I introduced in the previous section. For in both cases (inferences from cause and effect, and inference to the “distinct” and “continu’d” existence of certain impressions) custom leads us to make a natural transition (or loosely, an inference) from the appearance of one object to another (in the case of causation we infer an effect from a cause) or of one aspect of our impressions of sensation (in the case of belief in external,

independent objects their constancy and coherence) to their distinct and continued existence). In both cases, this inference is unreasoned (that is, not the *result* of a rational argument, nor *consequently supported* by rational argument). But in both cases, our natural endowment ensures that we are disposed to tenaciously hold to both of these conclusions: that a necessary connection of causation exists between certain objects, and that these objects exist independently of our perception of them. With this, Hume does not pretend to have explained causation, nor settled the question of the possibility of there being or not being an external world. Rather, he has provided, to the satisfaction of his own conception of the limits of explanation, inquiry, and the human understanding, an account in naturalistic terms, of how we form and adhere to beliefs that admit of no rational basis. Those who have read Hume as providing an alternate view of the ultimate nature of causation have, with good reason, found fault with his emphasis on constant conjunction giving rise to necessary connection. The only necessity in his view, however, is psychological; he attempts to explain how features of our natural endowment inevitably lead us to hold beliefs that are seemingly necessary for everyday action, but are nevertheless unreasonable (in the strict sense). This psychological necessity, then, is simply the result of our experience interacting with our natural endowment. We simply cannot help but hold tenaciously to our most deeply held beliefs.

It is not surprising that resistance forms against the central role that Hume attributes to the “imagination,” or “fancy.” This faculty is responsible for both our ability to track truth, and our propensity to follow illusion. Inferences that have been traditionally attributed to Reason (such as inductive inferences, and reasoning from

causes to effects) still stem from the “understanding” on Hume’s account. The difference is that the understanding for Hume is not concerned with a faculty of pure Reason (dedicated to manipulating syllogisms or reasoning from a priori starting points). Rather, the understanding is ultimately derived from “the general and more established properties of the imagination.”⁵⁸ As such, our inferences from cause to effect are established solely in the imagination, through a “full and perfect habit.”⁵⁹ But this means that the only feature of our minds that ensures a consistent and successful interaction with the world arises not from an infallible faculty like Reason, but through a customary transition of ideas in the imagination. Although, this may sound like irrationalism, it is only so from the perspective of a traditional account of the mind that would oppose Reason with the irrationalism. Hume’s point is that the workings of this aspect of the imagination are trustworthy and reliable. Our most deeply held beliefs, on his account, are not less worthy of trust; they are merely understood to be derived from different, non-rational mental operations. If the formation of these beliefs was attributed to the arbitrary workings of “the trivial properties of the fancy,” then Hume would be suggesting a sort of irrationalism. Instead, he is insisting on the non-rational (that is neither rational, nor irrational) nature of our belief-forming mechanism.

To substantiate this, Hume must explain how “the general and more established properties of the imagination” can be trusted to generate reliable beliefs. Introducing this criteria of reliability, in effect, distances his conception of belief from the traditional demand of philosophers that worthwhile beliefs must (to use a contemporary expression)

track the truth. For Hume, this latter demand is not only too much to ask, but crucially, it is ultimately *unnecessary*. In the conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume suggests:

[...] we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop'd for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination.⁶⁰

Satisfaction, on Hume's account, need not (and perhaps cannot) rely on a robust conception of truth. Rather, he must content himself with a plausible explanation for how and why creatures like us are able to act successfully, given our cognitive apparatus. Although Hume withholds judgment about most issues of ontology, he is clearly dogmatically committed to the unknowability of certain ultimate principles. With the abandonment of the requirement of truth (seemingly because there would be no possible way to get out outside the conclusions drawn in experience to verify them) Hume is left to battle the traditional bias that holds knowledge (true justified belief) to be a requirement of any satisfactory account.⁶¹

To use Hume's favorite example of billiard balls colliding, I will summarize the confluence of experience, custom, and mental association in generating belief. With the case of cause and effect, when presented with one billiard ball moving toward another, and after repeated instances, our mind customarily anticipates the effect. By transferring the force of the first impression to the idea of its effect, we come to feel a necessity holds in such matters. Since we are concerned here just with matters of fact, we can conceive of any possible effect following from the contact of the initial billiard ball (since the contrary of the second ball moving is conceivable due to its non-contradictory nature). But, as anyone can attest, even though the two balls colliding and stopping is conceivable

(among many other conceivable effects), we *believe* that one state of affairs will obtain rather than any other. We can conceive of many things, that is, that we nevertheless do not assent to or believe. This becomes the mystery to explain. If as Hume, contends, “the sentiment of belief is nothing but a conception more intense and steady than what attends the mere fictions of the imagination [...]”⁶² it remains to be seen how we can reliably and unproblematically distinguish between the fictitious concoctions of our imagination and states of affairs which actually obtain.

As has been hinted at above, Hume locates the difference between a fantasy of the imagination from a belief reliably generated in a feeling or “manner” of conception. To conceive of something, and then to conceive of that same thing as existing, “we in reality make no addition to or alteration on our first idea.”⁶³ Nonetheless, Hume tells us, there is a significant difference between how we act on the two ideas. Since it is not a matter of superadding a belief of existence to an already formulated conception, “it follows, that it must lie in the *manner*, in which we conceive it.”⁶⁴ Hume takes the example of two people contemplating the same historical proposition, but where one assents to it, and the other disbelieves it. They have the same idea (in all relevant respects) but one believes it and the other does not. Similarly, within a single person, we are familiar with instances where we once believed something but now do not, or vice versa. What changes about the idea to account for this change in our attitude toward it? If we somehow changed the idea substantially it would cease to be the same idea. So the only sense in which an idea can be altered, concerns the “force and vivacity” with which we conceive it.

Since Hume is writing about what it *feels* like for creatures like us to have a belief, he seems obliged, in the absence of available definitions, to appeal to what he supposes must be common experience. Although in language, he can only describe belief as any impression or idea that is *felt with the requisite force* or vivacity, he must ultimately leave his appeal to the introspection of his readers: “[...] ’tis impossible by words to describe this feeling, which everyone must feel in his own breast.”⁶⁵ Simply put, any normal human being can discern for themselves the difference between say, the state of affairs that obtain in a daydream—a faint idea that can provide no motivation to action—and a belief, which owing to the force with which it is presented to the mind, is capable of being an impetus for action. “This definition,” Hume contends, “will also be found to be entirely conformable to everyone’s feeling and experience.”⁶⁶ Even if we grant this phenomenological point to Hume, more should still be said about how some items conceived by the mind become beliefs, while others do not.

The question becomes, by what mechanism do some perceptions obtain the requisite force and vivacity to count as beliefs, while other chimerical fictions of the fancy are clearly recognized and branded as such? The answer, according to Hume, is to be found in the relation of impressions to ideas. If an impression is vivid, it will transfer a share of that vivacity to the idea. This forceful idea, is then believed, rather than just conceived. This is the association or transition that is owing entirely to natural structures of the mind, rather than any rational argument or reasoned inference. It is evident now how, for Hume, beliefs are not only non-volitional, but also non-rational. Consider the succinct definition of belief he offers in the *Treatise*: “A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO

OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION.”⁶⁷ Beliefs arise through association not deliberation; we assent as a result of natural principles, not evidence. So the question concerning belief, according to Hume, is not about the ultimate nature of, say, causation, but rather how and why we confidently believe in its existence. The same holds with our unshakeable belief in the existence of the external world. In a sense, Hume presents us in the end with an answer to a very different question than might be expected on these topics. While we might suspect to ask and answer, ‘By what natural principles does causation work?’ Hume is concerned with the natural principles that lead us to form an idea of causation as a reliable and thus trustworthy process. As H.O Mounce puts it:

[...] nature does not *explain* wherein the certainty of causation lies; nevertheless it ensures that we trust in its certainty. That is because it is not necessary to our survival that we understand causation; what is necessary is that we trust it.⁶⁸

And whatever uneasiness might arise from discovering that our belief in causation is not rationally justified, can be quelled, Hume contends, simply by developing his “science of man” to describe how we do come to this belief. On the supposition that Hume’s account of belief-formation is correct, then the further question about rationally justifying our most deeply held beliefs need not arise. For the reliability of our predictions and explanations based on causation, induction, and the existence of an external world was never really in question. These beliefs *are*, on the whole, trustworthy, useful, and perhaps indispensable. *Minimally, they are the best we have to go on.* This fact is what Hume tries to explain in thoroughly naturalistic terms. It is a feature of his account that the inevitably sceptical conclusions of philosophical inquiry cannot cause a prolonged crisis in belief. More positively, if applied to its narrow task, philosophy and

science can contribute to our understanding of human nature, and thus, also satisfy our seemingly natural craving for explanation and understanding. This emphasis on the naturalness of our given instincts, may strike the reader with the obvious rejoinder that the human capacity to reason is given to us by nature just as surely as our more animal instincts. Hume would not want to deny this. Hume is trying, rather, to counteract the traditional bias toward enlarging the scope of human reason beyond its limits.

When Hume comes to question the possibility of a human being actually consistently holding to full-fledged Pyrrhonian scepticism,⁶⁹ we need not suspect that this incredulity is feigned as a rhetorical strategy, or that it represents a misplaced sense of wonder. It stems, rather, directly from his account of belief formation. Reason and philosophy may make abundantly clear the failure of all previous philosophers to rationally justify our most deeply held beliefs. In part, this is what the bulk of the sceptical arguments put forth in both the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* aim to establish. But these considerations pale in comparison to the effectiveness of our natural instincts and habits of mental association to provide us with vivid beliefs, which are unshakeable by mere philosophical doubts. Recall Hume's insistence that "Nature [...] has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel."⁷⁰ What I earlier called Hume's *provisional respect* for the power of scepticism can be understood in the following sense: he is certainly a "philosophical sceptic," that is, he holds that scepticism is the natural and inevitable outcome of trying to reason about our most deeply held beliefs. But though "Philosophy wou'd render us entirely *Pyrrhonian* [...]," Hume prefers to emphasize, that "[n]ature is always too strong for principle."⁷¹ Any crisis arising in philosophy, which results from

feeling the force of sceptical arguments, is necessarily short-lived. We cannot sustain intense philosophical reflection for very long. Moreover, this sceptical crisis in philosophy will never be capable of infecting our most deeply held beliefs. Viewed in a positive way, scepticism can even be seen to have an indirect benefit: it serves to motivate our investigation into “Human Nature [...] the only science of man;” which prior to Hume’s radical working out of the scope and force of philosophical scepticism “ha[d] been hitherto the most neglected.”⁷² Thus philosophical scepticism drove Hume to discover the limits of scepticism, which in turn led to the discovery of the inevitable triumph of our natural beliefs.

I will now take a closer look at how the essential ingredients in Hume’s view (his empiricism and anti-rationalism, his scepticism and naturalism, and his emphasis on the role of human nature) influence, and are influenced by, his metaphilosophical views about the scope of philosophical inquiry. This will include examining both how he envisions the aspirations of philosophy, and the requirements he sets out as the criteria of satisfaction necessary to achieve that goal.

2.4 Hume’s Project, In His Own Words

Debate over the relative merits of the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* remains a moot point.⁷³ Nowhere is the contrast between the tone of Hume’s project in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* more pronounced than in their respective introductions. I will provide a close reading of each introduction in order to outline both what Hume suggests his aims are, and what the presuppositions underlying them may tell us about his overall approach. Both introductions provide a clear description of what Hume takes to be not only the *task*

of philosophy, but also the *source* of its *limitations*. A study of “human nature” or “the science of man” holds the ultimate key, according to Hume, for understanding both. His estimation of the feasibility of this project undergoes significant dampening in the *Enquiry*. However, his overall contentment about the state of philosophy actually increases, not because he significantly modifies the nature of his project, but because he adjusts his theoretical aspirations in line with his metaphilosophical commitments. This includes a revision of what the proper aspirations and criteria of satisfaction for philosophical theories should be.

The introduction to the *Treatise* opens with a cautionary note about the hubris of philosophers who present their own systems as the antidote to, and overcoming of, the ignorance contained in all past systems of philosophy. Even the best systems, Hume contends, admit of “weak foundation[s],” and rely at some point on “[p]rinciples taken on trust.” For this reason, Hume suggests a philosopher would do better to be “content with lamenting that ignorance, which we still lie under in the most important questions [...]”⁷⁴ rather than erroneously claiming to have found, once and for all, the ultimate principle(s) of nature. Notice, that in one sense, Hume can be seen to be preparing the reader for the places in his own account where he must rest content with acknowledging ignorance with regard to “ultimate principles.” But in another sense, he is referring to the lack of understanding that each reader has, at that moment, prior to reading the *Treatise* itself. That is, although Hume insists throughout the *Treatise* that we run into the boundaries of our understanding every time we reach the extent of possible experience, we are in a much better place overall once we recognize the lesson of the *Treatise*, namely, that the

“center” of all sciences is the study of “human nature itself.”⁷⁵ This does not guarantee that we ever will completely understand “the secret springs and principles”⁷⁶ of human nature, in particular, or the rest of nature, in general. In fact, Hume makes the more controversial claim that we will *not* be able to do so, and directly as a result of our own nature. So the upshot of this position is that whatever understanding we may gain in other sciences will be ultimately tied to, and limited by, human nature and our understanding of its principles.

It may be hard to fathom how Hume can escape his own charge of hubris here, considering that Hume is ostensibly ready to supply a new philosophical system of his own, which he surely thinks overcomes the blindness of past systems. Take for instance his famous pronouncement about the *Treatise* that he made in a personal letter:

My principles are also so remote from all the vulgar sentiments on the subject, that were they to take place, they would produce almost a total alteration in philosophy: and you know, revolutions of this kind are not easily brought about.⁷⁷

However, turning Hume’s diagnosis against himself is not fair to Hume’s stated intentions, nor to how he proceeds in the *Treatise*. For what Hume is ultimately striving for, is a system that is as comprehensive as possible, without thereby feigning absolute completeness. Hume remains acutely aware that his own views must be considered with the same commitment to fallibilism that he brings to his critical work. Hume admits, that like all systems of philosophy, his must fall short of a completely general account of the whole of nature.

Hume segues into a brief discussion about the unsettled foundations of philosophy and science, both of which admit of “contrary opinions” even about fundamental issues.

He continues with the suggestion that “if truth be at all within the reach of human capacity, ’tis certain it must lie very deep and abstruse.”⁷⁸ This aspect of his view is markedly changed in both the matter and manner of the *Enquiry*, which reveals what Selby-Bigge calls “Hume’s new principle of not trying to penetrate beneath the obvious explanation of phenomena.”⁷⁹ Having thus warned the reader of the difficulty of the work to follow, Hume introduces the guiding principle that motivates the *Treatise*:

’Tis evident, that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature; and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another. Even *Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion*, are in some measure dependent on the science of MAN; since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties.⁸⁰

I want to comment on three things in this key passage. (1) Hume repeatedly insists that philosophy suffers from its reliance on the authority of ancient and scholastic philosophies. It is not, however, to be replaced here by a conception of philosophy that is entirely without authorities or foundations. “The science of human nature,” which Hume proposes to share with the reader is one such authority on his view, and more generally, experience (shaped by custom and natural principles of association) is another. His approach may have been novel but it does not come with the virtue, as Hume would have it, of being able to entirely “shake off the yoke of authority.”⁸¹ That is because, as he unwittingly acknowledges elsewhere, Hume merely shifts which authorities we would rely on; he does not eliminate the need for such a reliance itself.

(2) The second, and related, point is that tying all human knowledge (as the sciences are generally presumed to supply) to human nature is indeed a radical, and anti-rationalist, proposal. It introduces a subjective element quite distinct from the Cartesian

move toward privileging the subject. It has been suggested that Hume is much less concerned with providing a “scientific” account of human nature in the *Enquiry* than in the *Treatise*.⁸² If this is so, it would mark an important point of comparison from which to analyze Hume’s modified metaphilosophical principles. James T. King has diagnosed “a quite real tension between the hope for a new system of the sciences and the despair of achieving knowledge satisfactory to the mind.”⁸³ I would take this statement further by suggesting that apart from the following realization mentioned in the *Treatise*, Hume himself only shows signs of being comfortable with this tension in the *Enquiry*:

I do not think that a philosopher, who would apply himself so earnestly to the [sic] explaining the ultimate principles of the soul, would show himself a great master in that very science of human nature, which he pretends to explain, or very knowing in what is naturally satisfactory to the mind of man. For nothing is more certain, than that despair has almost the same effect upon us with enjoyment, and that *we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes*.⁸⁴

In short, Hume is suggesting that running into the limits of explanation, need not lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, but rather, to the alteration of the original aspirations of the inquiry.⁸⁵ There are two possibilities I want to highlight that may account for this apparent discrepancy. The first is that Hume’s expression of these feelings of extreme disappointment are supposed to mirror what his reader is likely feeling, since she has just experienced the force of Hume’s sceptical considerations, and possibly for the first time. For surely, Hume presents himself at all times on this mutual journey as a representative of the shared experiences of human beings. This is warranted by his general approach, since he is presenting an account of human nature that leads all of us to have similar experiences. But it is unlikely that this extended passage can be explained away as a

rhetorical foil to establish Hume's sympathy with the shock of his readers. Another possibility is that Hume actually succumbs to a psychological phenomenon he later expresses in Book II. There, during a discussion of the origins of the human propensity toward a love of truth, he registers this point:

[...] I shall make a general remark, which may be useful on many occasions, *viz.* that where the mind pursues any end with passion; tho' that passion be not deriv'd originally from the end, but merely from the action and pursuit; yet by the natural course of the affections, we acquire a concern for the end itself, and are uneasy under any disappointment we meet with in the pursuit of it.⁸⁶

In other words, although philosophical inquiry may be initially motivated by a general end (say, the love of truth), during the process of investigation, the more specific aim (traditionally, a non-circular rational argument assented to by Reason to secure our most deeply held beliefs) comes to be desired as much as our primary, general aim. The problem, of course, is that sometimes these general and specific aims can clash, or worse, can be discovered to be contrary and incompatible. Such is the case with Hume's general attempt to provide an accurate account of philosophical inquiry. His result (with regard to the aim of truth) conflicts with what is traditionally demanded from a satisfactory philosophical position (namely, that it be supported by non-circular rational justification and argumentation). For what he presents as beyond the limits of inquiry and justification, are the very topics of concern that traditional inquiry aims to explain.

What I am contending is that Hume still feels closely connected to the traditional aim of philosophical inquiry in the *Treatise* in a way that he later does not in the *Enquiry*. He reports obvious discomfort at his failure to produce an account in the *Treatise* that will be deemed satisfactory to the traditional aspirations of a philosophical account.

However, in the *Enquiry* although he presents a very similar overall account to that of the *Treatise*, he no longer refers to himself as mired “in the most deplorable condition imaginable,” but rather as simply aware of “the whimsical condition of mankind.”⁸⁷ Once again, this phenomena, the eventual (yet gradual) alteration of what Hume is comfortable to accept as the goal of inquiry and the requirements of a satisfactory philosophical theory can be explained with reference to his own general theory of human nature. For in the *Treatise* Hume also discusses as “constant constituents of human nature:” a feeling of “unpleasantness of too sudden a change,” and “a diminution of aversion through familiarization.”⁸⁸ This shows not only the depth of Hume’s commitment to analyzing the basic principles of human psychology, but also his own susceptibility to them. Hume, considered as the guide to this radical new conception of belief and inquiry, is shown also to be a fellow traveller, as vulnerable to the nature of our shared endowment as are his readers. Regardless of this change in tone, it seems beyond question, that Hume always regarded philosophy as both an outgrowth of, and ultimately limited by, what he understood to be the basic principles of human nature.

In the *Treatise*, Hume refers to “a more delicate satisfaction” that may be obtained from reaching the limits of explanation, and then having the sense to go no farther. The potential enjoyment gained from this less robust satisfaction does not seem available to the Hume of the *Treatise*. But then again, his avowed aim of that book is still to provide a foundation for the entirety of human knowledge. Laird captures the point that for Hume,

[...] ultimate and imperturbable *intellectual* ‘satisfaction’ was out of the question. On the other hand, Hume seems to have thought that the ‘mitigated’ satisfaction attaching to Newtonian physics, or to what was accepted as proof in the law

courts, might very well be within the compass of his philosophy of human nature.⁸⁹

In a sense, the morose conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise* finds Hume-the-anatomist-of-human-nature running headlong into Hume-the-philosopher. Both of these tendencies are present with considerable strength in Hume, and not surprisingly, this leads to conflict:

When we trace up the human understanding to its first principles, we find it leads us into such sentiments, as seem to turn into ridicule our past pains and industry, and to discourage us from future enquiries. Nothing is more curiously enquir'd after by the mind of man, than the causes of every phaenomenon; nor are we content with knowing the immediate causes, but push on our enquiries, till we arrive at the original and ultimate principle. [...] This is the aim of all our studies and reflections: And how must we be disappointed, when we learn, that this connexion or tie, or energy lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquir'd by custom, and causes us to make a transition from an object to its usual attendant [...].⁹⁰

So Hume admits that “we [are] disappointed” when he locates the source of causal reasoning in the imagination and the customary mental property of association. It is as if the traditional question, ‘Where is the external relation of necessary connection causation to be found?’ has an unshakeable hold on our collective philosophical mind. The burden, then, for Hume, is to deny this question’s validity, and show that it imports a condition that is *unattainable on any philosophical account*. Hume does precisely this when he suggests that if his failure to explain ultimate principles is to be held against his account, then it must be held against all previous accounts as well.⁹¹ He must dislodge the prejudice that most readers would hold for accepting this request for ultimate explanations as natural, reasonable, and at least, in principle, attainable. Not surprisingly, he cannot offer a non-circular reason to accept his *revised* proposal. This connects with the issue, discussed above, concerning the extent to which revision at the fundamental

level of concepts and metaphilosophical principles may be allowed, or should be blocked. Again, further discussion on this head must be postponed. Let it suffice to say for now that there are grave difficulties in establishing agreement with Hume on the following point: “And tho’ we can never arrive at the ultimate principles, ’tis a satisfaction to go as far as our faculties will allow us.”⁹² This raises a seemingly intractable difficulty. Such a thoroughly fallibilistic and modest sense of the limited capability of human intelligence to comprehend the whole of nature may seem like an improvement (to some) over rationalist pretensions (who held that the universe is entirely rational, and hence, knowable through Reason). However, a problem arises when agreement is sought over how far back is far enough. For every philosopher willing to revise our aspirations about the generality of explanation required for a *satisfactory* account, there will be other, more traditional, metaphysically-inclined philosophers, to whom Hume’s proposal will sound like intellectual irresponsibility, and even anti-scientific laziness.

I will now turn to a close reading of the opening of the first *Enquiry*, which I contend sheds light on Hume’s new-found contentment with the revised criteria of satisfaction he began to consider in the *Treatise*. Hume begins §1 of the *Enquiry* by outlining “two different manners” of approaching philosophy. Significantly, he distinguishes the two approaches by emphasizing the view each takes toward the essential character of human beings. “The one [type of philosopher] considers man chiefly as born for action” while “[t]he other species of philosophers consider man in the light of a reasonable rather than an active being.”⁹³ Hume’s immediate analysis points to strengths and weaknesses of both approaches, and does not seem to exclusively champion one

approach over the other. He does however stress that there are “dangerous illusions” associated with the rationalistic pretensions of the latter approach. These can be eliminated, if one tempers the more extravagant aspirations of philosophers with the more common-sense, action-based perspective of the former. Playing the “easy and obvious” approach to philosophy against the “accurate and abstruse,” allows Hume to establish a terrain of *media via*, within which to situate his own view. This can be seen to foreshadow the “mitigated” sceptical position he comes to endorse in the *Enquiry*—a view that balances the tension of philosophical scepticism with a thoroughly naturalistic theory of belief. But also, Hume’s analysis here complements his suggestion, put forth later in the opening section, “that nature has pointed out a mixed kind of life as the most suitable [...]”⁹⁴ In that context, Hume is specifically referring to drawing a balance between devoting ourselves to the mentally taxing rigours of philosophy, and other human projects. However, it can also be seen to apply to what Hume diagnoses as the two-sided nature of our existence: as creatures perched between, on the one side, philosophy and reason, on the other, instinct and action. A philosophy of the sort Hume is endorsing would approach human beings not only as both reasonable creatures and creatures of action, but also as social animals.⁹⁵

So now, having examined how Hume envisions the broad classification of competing philosophical projects, we may turn to his own philosophical *self-image*. Recall the distinction between the popular, easy manner of philosophers who privilege eloquence while aiming to cultivate morals, and the more abstruse and difficult work of abstract metaphysicians who esteem truth and accuracy. Not surprisingly, Hume wants to

find a middle way, in which he can reconcile the strengths of each, while minimizing their respective faults: “Happy, if we can unite the boundaries of the different species of philosophy, by reconciling profound enquiry with clearness, and truth with novelty!”⁹⁶ Just as “Nature” recommends a mixed sort of life for human beings—balanced between thought and action—so must a philosopher aim to split the difference between the pretensions of rationalist metaphysics and the apparent lack of ambition in “the easy philosophy.” Hume promises he can deliver this without relinquishing the “spirit of accuracy.”⁹⁷

Consider also the words that Hume puts into the mouth of a personified “Nature”:

Let your science be human, and such as may have a direct reference to action and society. Abstruse thought and profound researches I prohibit, and will severely punish, by the pensive melancholy which they introduce, by the endless uncertainty in which they involve you, and by the cold reception which your pretended discoveries shall meet with, when communicated. Be a philosopher; but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man.”⁹⁸

Notice that Hume’s prescriptions found elsewhere are identical to what he offers here as Nature’s own advice. This passage is pregnant with pointers toward Hume’s overall view. First, he reiterates his disapproval of abstruse metaphysics. He then alludes to the state he found himself in after Book I (“pensive melancholy”), which he vividly recalled in the conclusion there. Then we have this fundamental imperative: “Be a philosopher, but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man.”

This last remark can be understood as a recommendation against allowing one’s philosophical principles to obscure one’s primary identification as a human being. Ultimately, this means recognizing the primacy of those parts of our nature that we apparently share with animals. That we are sometimes confused about our self-image is

not surprising considering the variance of the pictures we are provided with. We are asked to consider ourselves alternately as creatures born for reason or creatures “born for action.” The former invites us to construct a self-image of ourselves as creatures who follow the dictates of Reason in pursuit of intellectual goals. The second description lends itself to a radically different self-image: We are creatures for whom acting is more important than anything else, including thinking. As such, the similarity of this description with common animals must spring to mind. That our essential natures share a great deal with the rest of the animal kingdom would alone have been an affront to many rationalists and theologians. But what is worse (to the traditional rationalist-religious view) is that the higher order thought processes we gain from our advanced cognitive faculties, according to Hume, lead more often than not to the creation of problems rather than to their solution. These conflicting images of the characteristic nature of human beings can be captured in the tension which Hume recognizes in his own view: Human beings are divided between the tendency of their Reason to lead them into “profound researches,” (for which they feel great pride and superiority over other animals), and the conclusion that his own philosophy eventually arrives at: that our most deeply held beliefs are provided by a non-rational procedure that is implanted by nature, and shared with common animals. The imagination, in conjunction with a customary transition that associates a cause with what is constantly conjoined with it (its “effect”) is the source of our most deeply held belief about what we take to be the necessary connection between causes and effects. We believe in the permanence and continued existence of external

objects for the same “reasons” that animals do. The “inference” (in Hume’s loose sense) is really nothing more than an habitual association between lively impressions and ideas.

If we try to restore Reason to some of its former respect, by trying to subsequently rationally justify this belief, we confront frustration at the inability of our vaunted Reason for the task. In other words, Reason is responsible for neither the origin, nor the sustenance of, our most deeply held beliefs. Nature ensures that we adhere to beliefs that are not capable, even after the fact, of rational justification. Not only is Reason robbed of its traditional position as the pinnacle of human greatness, but it is ultimately robbed of its status as the defining characteristic that elevates the status of human beings above animals.

To conclude this comparison of Hume’s respective outlooks on his project in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* I want to focus on the parting advice offered by Hume in each. Hume’s account in the *Treatise*, which relies on a radical revision of the role of Reason, and the resultant abandonment of the traditional requirement for rational justification of our most deeply held beliefs, leaves him feeling somewhat distraught. He considers himself caught between the horns of “a very dangerous dilemma.” If we accept the contribution of the imagination, *without restriction*, we will be led to contradiction and incoherence. If we exclude the role of the imagination completely, we will be left with “not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition,” since the understanding (also known as Reason, or the general properties of the imagination) left to work on its own will “subvert itself.” Unfortunately, we do not have a rational method of non-arbitrarily demarcating what should count as allowable, as opposed to avoidable, contributions of

the imagination; and we ought to avoid arbitrariness. He considers the option of embracing “total scepticism” in the wake of this troubled intersection of the understanding and the imagination. This would be to abandon all hope of practicing “refin’d or elaborate reasoning.”⁹⁹ Think twice, is Hume’s advice, since such a move would “cut off entirely all science and philosophy.” This would result in “manifest absurdities,” since it would undercut the very process that led to calling into question “remote” reasoning in the first place. To jettison either one (the “general and more established properties of the imagination”) or the other (the “trivial properties” of the imagination)¹⁰⁰ leads to “a false reason or none at all.” So what can Hume offer us about the impasse brought about by the tangled intersection of our faculties of understanding and imagination?

For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case. [...] Very refin’d reflections have little or no influence upon us [Hume states before this passage that this fact itself is a trivial property of the imagination]; and yet we do not, and cannot establish it for a rule, that they ought not to have any influence; which implies a manifest contradiction.¹⁰¹

Whether we accept or shun the influence of the imagination, and what the extent of our inquiry should be, cannot be established with anything approximating exactness. For obvious reasons, Hume is displeased with this outcome. Imagination and custom are responsible for supplying the processes by which we reason causally. This process is required for all knowledge of matters of fact, and yet, there is no clear cut rule that can help us demarcate what contribution of the imagination should be allowed, and which should be rejected. Philosophy has thus led us to the Pyrrhonian question, whether holding any one position is better than any other.

By the end of the *Enquiry*, however, Hume has extracted a lesson from the Pyrrhonian scepticism that frustrated his project and tormented him personally in the *Treatise*.¹⁰² This new proposal preserves not only a realm of acceptable experimental philosophy but also secures newfound peace of mind: we must restrict “our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding.”¹⁰³ Notice that the net difference from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiry* is not very great. In order to proceed with any assurance, we must restrict our inquiries to investigate only “*abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number*” and “*experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence*.”¹⁰⁴ All other research, leading as it will to frustration, uncertainty and melancholy, can be profitably left behind. Hume’s famous advice to “commit to the flames” the books of the metaphysical tradition that preceded him, can also be seen as a cathartic rite of passage for Hume. For in that effigy of traditional philosophical aspirations, Hume’s own tension perishes—what is evidently troublesome in the *Treatise*, is overcome in the *Enquiry*. I will now proceed to flesh out this claim by further examining the details of Hume’s revised conception of philosophy. This will be seen to be closely connected to the findings of the science of human nature. Importantly, this should not be seen as giving up on the enterprise of understanding human beings in a philosophical sense. Hume is proposing, however, a radically different picture of human beings and Reason. Nicholas Capaldi recognizes, with regard to the frequent complaint that Hume’s program is based in psychology instead of philosophy, that the issue is fundamentally metaphilosophical in nature: “What we have here are rival conceptions of philosophy.”¹⁰⁵ I think this point is fundamental, and I will return to it throughout this

study. It is important to study Hume's metaphilosophy—especially his prolonged struggle to change the nature and scope of what is understood to count as philosophy—while recognizing that he always remained somewhat uncomfortable with the method (and even the possibility) of revision.

2.5 The Nature and Scope of Philosophy

H.O. Mounce prefaces his account of Hume's scepticism with the following point:

Hume's philosophy in the *Treatise* draws a limit to knowledge or understanding. This philosophy will therefore strike some as sceptical.¹⁰⁶

This feature alone (seeking to draw a limit to the scope of human reason) should not be enough to warrant the label 'sceptical.' Rather, it is only against a background of rationalist assumptions that drawing limits to our understanding is tantamount to scepticism. This is, of course, because traditionally, rationalists—especially theistic ones—have supposed that philosophy and science offer, via our God-given cognitive capacities, a window into the workings of nature—from the grandest cosmological theories to the most intimate details of our own mind. But claiming that there are limits to human understanding should not alone be seen to commit someone to scepticism. In order to do so, one must also endorse a suppressed premise, along the lines of the common rationalist claim, that nature—from the furthest known reaches of the universe, to the most intricate detail of the human brain—must be knowable (at least in principle). This is guaranteed, it is commonly supposed, by God's will or intention that human beings be able to rationally comprehend the essentially rational universe. To be clear, holding both that there are limits, and that there must not be limits would be

contradictory. However, I am pointing out that in order to see the drawing of limits as an inherently sceptical stance only makes sense on the assumption that we feel a loss or lack within Hume's system, as compared to the aspirations of theistic rationalists. Since Hume's model of human nature eschews recourse to presuppositions about God, this drawing of a limit to human understanding can be seen in a more complimentary, and consistent, naturalistic light. Again, it must be stressed that failure to keep Hume's anti-rationalist stance firmly in mind will lead to misunderstandings. Without the rationalist presuppositions that could lead us to equate scepticism with the mere drawing of limits to our understanding, it remains to be seen what Hume's metaphilosophical commitments were, and how they shaped his project.

In this final section of the chapter, I will summarize the features of Hume's account that serve as his criteria of satisfaction. One way to get at this is to posit how Hume would answer the following questions: (1) 'What is the task of philosophy?' (2) 'What is the proper scope of philosophical inquiry?' (3) 'What value does the study of philosophy have in general, given its propensity toward scepticism?' The answers to these three questions shed light on Hume's metaphilosophical commitments. Furthermore, they will begin to reveal the requirements Hume has set as the criteria of satisfaction for any philosophical theory.

(1) In the *Treatise* Hume presents an irredeemably reductionistic view of the task of philosophy. His aim is to "render all our principles as universal as possible" with the hope of rectifying our ignorance concerning the "science of man." Inspired by his intellectual hero, Isaac Newton, Hume presents his project, with considerable hope, as

“An ATTEMPT to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects.”¹⁰⁷ Although much is made of this attempted extension of Newtonian principles into philosophy,¹⁰⁸ it is rarely emphasized that this “ATTEMPT” was deemed by Hume himself to be a failure.¹⁰⁹ I have argued that this recognition, which led to despair in the conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise* is replaced by contentment at the close of the *Enquiry*, seemingly for no other reason than that Hume has withdrawn, in the latter book, his aspiration to provide the foundation for a “compleat system of the sciences.” In its place, Hume allows for practical concerns to act as a negative criterion for acceptable philosophical inquiry. For instance, he dismisses Pyrrhonian philosophy—which he seemed unable to fully dismiss in the *Treatise*, and perhaps never fully dismisses when judging it on purely theoretical grounds—in part for failing to produce a “durable good.”

“We need only ask such a sceptic,” Hume suggests,

What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches? He is immediately at a loss and knows not what to answer. [...] [A] Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society.”

In a general sense, this seems to allow for utility as a negative criterion of satisfaction in constructing philosophical theories. I will further discuss the role of this negative criterion of satisfaction below.

In the conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume seems frustrated at the limitations he finds posed by his own conclusions. By the final section of the *Enquiry* he appears to have come to terms with the limitations of philosophy, just as he had with those of reason and rational argument in the *Treatise*: “The sceptic, therefore, had better keep within his proper sphere [...]”¹¹⁰ The full force of this claim stems from Hume’s

outright identification of philosophical reflection with scepticism. In other words, the philosopher should learn its place, and stay out of the business of trying to rationally justify our most deeply held beliefs. The “melancholy and “despair” evinced in the conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise* is replaced by a recognition of “the whimsical condition of mankind.” But just as so many aspects of nature are contingent and alterable, so must we come to see the history of philosophy as the unfortunate pursuit of the contingent (and unreasonable) aspirations of past philosophers.

(2) What needs to be recognized here is that on Hume’s account we may speak interchangeably about the limits of human understanding and the limits of philosophy. As such, the answers to these questions are all intimately related. This, of course, follows from Hume’s central contention that we discover the limits of all science and philosophy when we discover the principles of human nature. Although “Human Nature [...] has been hitherto the most neglected” science, it is, properly speaking, “the only science of man.”¹¹¹ The scope of philosophy is coextensive with the bounds of the principles of human nature. Therefore we will reach the boundaries of philosophical investigation when we arrive at the level of generality that can be discovered in experience. Anything beyond that point will be useless metaphysical speculation. As Hume says in the *Enquiry*, “[t]he experienced train of events is *the great standard*, by which we regulate our conduct. Nothing else can be appealed to in the field or in the senate. Nothing else ought ever to be heard of in the school, or in the closet.”¹¹² Possible experience, that is, regulates not only our daily practical activities; it also regulates the extent of our inquiries.¹¹³

(3) Hume's response to the third question is partially revealed in the first two. Scepticism, Hume tells us in the *Treatise* is intimately related to philosophy insofar as the latter inevitably leads to the former. However, it is unlikely, owing to a propensity in some people, that philosophy will be abandoned. In the *Treatise*, Hume recommends the study of philosophy, despite its shortcomings, for at least it lacks the dangerous pretensions of rationalism and theology.¹¹⁴ In a sense, it is the lesser of evils, when compared to religion and superstition. But this is hardly a resounding endorsement. In the *Enquiry*, Hume sums up our epistemic and lived situation, with reference to what he considers the sceptical "lessons" of Berkeley. Sceptical arguments "*admit of no answer and produce no conviction.*"¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the resultant effects are limited to "momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion." This, of course, is equally applicable to his own project in the *Treatise*. However, the sceptical journey, for Hume, is still a valuable one. In fact, he considers it a "necessary preparative to the study of philosophy,"¹¹⁶ since it both clears away accumulated biases and inspires modesty about the power of reason to understand ourselves and our world. So it is not only, as he suggests in the *Treatise*, less dangerous than rationalism and theology, but familiarity with sceptical philosophy actually better prepares us to resist the dogmatic spirit that can take hold in other areas. An understanding of the power of scepticism cannot restore the value of traditional philosophy; it can serve, however, to alter the attitude we take toward theorizing. The potential for damage owing to following a false philosophy, Hume suggests, is magnified beyond acceptable risk, only if it is presented with dogmatic pretensions.

In addition to the three questions set out above, let me briefly discuss a fourth: ‘By what criteria are we do judge the adequacy or satisfactoriness of a philosophical theory?’ A summary of the interpretation canvassed in this chapter, in addition to the specific responses offered above, will provide a summary of Hume’s own criteria of satisfaction. First, a satisfactory account must adhere to the empiricist assumptions that he lays out in his test for meaning. This is his requirement that ideas must correspond to, while being ultimately derived from, basic impressions. Here a “negative” challenge is proposed. In short, those who would disagree with Hume’s general maxim that all ideas can be eventually traced to source simple impressions are challenged to provide a counter example. That the burden of proof is incumbent upon his opponent is taken for granted by Hume. Related to this empiricist proviso is that any knowledge of the external world must be stem from sense data. In Chapter 3, Barry Stroud and Michael Williams tackle this seemingly innocuous claim and its far-reaching sceptical consequences.

The criterion that at once seems most traditional, but also carries with it the furthest reaching consequences for Hume’s scepticism, is the requirement that rational inferences must not reason in a circle. As we saw, making inductive predictions are deemed non-rational since they require a question-begging assumption of a bridge premise like PUN. Hume withholds the label of justified for such inferences, though, in general, he is not averse to allowing them when he can provide a naturalistic explanation for them.

A criterion that is arguably appealed to in Hume’s work is that of utility or pragmatic worth. Although I have argued above that Hume does not rely on prudential

reasoning to secure our most deeply held beliefs, he does rely on utility as a negative criterion of theory acceptance to motivate his ultimate decision to pull back from absolute Pyrrhonian scepticism. In the final chapter of the *Enquiry* Hume defends himself against the charge of being a full-fledged sceptic, endorsing instead a “mitigated” scepticism. He first calls into question what might be meant by calling someone a sceptic, since on his account, the possibility of living the sceptical conclusion seems incoherent. Despite having just established over the course of his book, the lack of philosophical justification for our trust in induction and relations of cause and effect, he is content to stress the practical necessity, and primacy, of everyday actions. For Hume, if nothing else, is concerned that his “science of man” or “compleat system of the sciences” can be put to use in helping to better understand human beings and their nature. To use Michael Williams’ phrase, Hume has pointed out the “instability of human knowledge,” and pointed to the context-dependence of both our ordinary certainties and our philosophical doubts. “The great subverter of *Pyrrhonism* or the excessive principles of scepticism,” Hume contends “is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life.”¹¹⁷ His modesty-inducing critique of justification aims both at a denigration of excessive rationalism, and by extension, a revision of how we are to understand the role and value of philosophy. Regarding our ordinary understanding of our sensations and the world around us, Hume says: “[H]ere philosophy finds herself extremely embarrassed, when she would justify this new system.”¹¹⁸ But to suggest ultimately that “[n]ature is always too strong for principle”¹¹⁹ is hardly to excuse the philosophical “embarrassment” of not being able to justify our ordinary claims to knowledge. It is rather to say that

philosophy's shortcomings do not matter as much as the fundamental practical concerns required to sustain life.

Hume's considerations can be seen as relying on a criterion of utility or pragmatic relevance in the following ways: (1) he stresses the importance of being able to act upon beliefs, and (2) his assessment of the value of theoretical scepticism ultimately rests on the use to which it can be put. It is not the case that his naturalistic way out of the sceptical conclusion amounts merely to what Williams has labelled "bluff pragmatism." That would be to suggest that all we can do is throw up our hands at our inability to live scepticism, and turning necessity into a virtue, then claim that "we don't have to respond to scepticism because it makes no difference whether we do or not."¹²⁰ Rather, (2) becomes evident in his concluding remarks, after discussing the "triumph" of the sceptic in purely "philosophical" contexts. "These arguments might be displayed at greater length," Hume recommends,

if any durable good or benefit to society could ever be expected to result from them.

For here is the chief and most confounding objection to *excessive* scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour. We need only ask such a sceptic, *What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches?* He is immediately at a loss, and knows not how to answer."¹²¹

But of course the above passage only makes sense if one already accepts the pragmatic constraint that putting a belief to work is the only (or at least, a sufficient) justification it can seek. For Hume, this is not really the case. Unlike philosophers like William James or Richard Rorty, Hume looks to deductive arguments as the ultimate model of fully grounded, suitable justification. Such justifications are lacking in the case of induction

however. The concluding pages of the *Enquiry* find Hume relying on pragmatic considerations, perhaps reluctantly, and definitely without the comfort shared by later pragmatists, who suggest that pragmatic justifications can be fully adequate. For these reasons, the role of utility in applying one's theory of human action to practical affairs, acts as a negative criterion of satisfaction for Hume.

Another, more controversial requirement, is that for Hume, we can never philosophize intelligibly about anything that is beyond possible human experience. This is related intimately to his requirement that a satisfactory account be thoroughly naturalistic. This, by extension, limits the level of generality (or depth) that we can hope to achieve in our explanatory accounts. Further, and as mentioned briefly earlier, Hume requires that any satisfactory model of explanation be general enough to cover both human beings and animals. All of these criteria of satisfaction merge into the most radical feature of Hume's view: coming to understand the limitations imposed on inquiry by the discoveries arising from the development of a "science of human nature," should change our inherited criteria of satisfaction (namely, that explanations should be complete, thoroughly general, absolutely certain, backed only by sound, deductive arguments). Furthermore, as evidenced by the change in tone from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiry*, we can come to accept, in time, the limitation on the scope and depth of possible inquiry without much discomfort. The near "total alteration in philosophy" that Hume suggests would result from the adoption of his "principles"¹²² would stem from these two metaphilosophical tenets: that (a) the preliminary task of philosophy is to investigate human beings in a thoroughly naturalistic manner; and (b) the results of this investigation

(coming to understand the limits of our experience and understanding) should be imposed as a limit on all future inquiries. Satisfaction, then, is a result of first applying ourselves to a naturalistic study of ourselves, and then, *revising our former aspirations*. This entails a move away from the ambitions of rationalist metaphysics, and toward a more limited, practical scientific research program.

Although I do not agree entirely with Pall S. Ardal's reading of the role of reason and truth in Hume's system, I agree whole-heartedly that, for Hume, "the most fundamental question to be asked about our metaphysical beliefs is not 'Are they true?' but rather 'Are we reasonable in holding them?'"¹²³ A radical, though accurate, way of summing up the "radical alteration" that would follow from adhering to Hume's view is that it *dissociates reliable belief from knowledge, and what is "reasonable" (in a loose sense) from what has rational justification*. Ardal's attempt to illuminate the "virtue of reasonableness in Hume's *Treatise*" is a valuable, if somewhat misleading, attempt to clarify the nature of reason and truth in Hume's overall view.¹²⁴ Ardal contends, quite correctly, that

truth as correspondence (and this seems to be the way Hume conceives of it) is of little consequence as a criterion of the adequacy of our beliefs when compared with the concept of reasonableness. To be reasonable is to possess a virtue which serves human ends and purposes and of which men consequently approve.¹²⁵

Although terminological disputes in philosophy are seldom fruitful, I think in this case, it is a marked advance to call what Ardal labels "reasonableness" and explains in terms of utility, by the less confusing term "reliability." Hume's criterion of belief-acceptance is that we adhere to judgments of the understanding (that is, the "more general and established properties of the imagination") that arise in a particular way (experience, shaped by custom, and led by principles of mental association). Since, as Ardal seems to

recognize, the best way to proceed according to Hume is to disregard the pronouncements of reason on certain topics, it is misleading to label this stance, “reasonableness.”

If for no other reason, we should reject this designation because one accepted sense of reasonable, is that of ‘conforming to, or stemming from the use of Reason.’ It is undeniable that Hume uses, without explicitly distinguishing, at least two senses of what is “reasonable.” The sense mentioned above, is essentially linked to the faculty and processes of Reason; the other, much looser sense, means that what is “reasonable” is any option that a sane, adult human being could *properly* accept. Importantly, this second, looser sense does import a normative element into what we ordinarily label “reasonable,” with regard to beliefs or actions. The key component of something being “reasonable” in this second sense is measured in terms of reliability, and not anything generally considered to be associated with the faculty or processes of Reason. The crucial distinction that is perhaps only implicit in Hume: *What is reliable, trustworthy, and “proper” to believe, is not necessary what is rationally justified or reasonable (in the first sense).*

This, however, does not make holding such beliefs *irrational*. For rationality is generally used in two distinct senses as well, distinguished very much along the lines used in calling something ‘reasonable.’ Something may be rational, in the strict sense, if it is warranted by arguments that meet the accepted standards of rationality or Reason. But again, in a looser sense, we attribute or deny rationality to someone’s beliefs or actions when we judge whether they are choosing a “proper” option, that is, one that any sane, adult human being could accept. The importance of all of this, is that on Hume’s account of natural belief, although he clearly denies that our most deeply held beliefs are

either reasonable (in the strict sense) or rational (in the strict sense), neither does he want to attribute these terms in a loose, normative sense. This is because, for Hume, there can be no praise or blame for adhering to our most deeply held beliefs. Ultimately, we have no choice in the matter. This is assured by our common endowment of human nature. That is, when we return to the relaxed mental life of our everyday activities, as we eventually must, we cease to fret over the scepticism that haunts our attempts to penetrate phenomena at a level of philosophical generality. One upside of Hume's naturalistic theory of our most deeply held beliefs is that it would be absurd to talk about an ethics of belief or epistemic responsibility when it comes to, say, our belief in the existence of an external world. What Hume would insist on, however, is that such beliefs that are not capable of rational justification, should not be given the status of dogmatic truths. If pushed far enough, the necessity of adhering to these indispensable beliefs, could become a normative matter of defining what constitutes sharing in human nature. Although he does not pursue this, any being capable of genuine, sustained doubt about, say, the existence of the external world, would have to be, on Hume's account, either a lunatic or non-human. In this sense, the full force of what Hume seems to mean by psychological necessity can be understood: the division between 'the beliefs we hold' and 'the beliefs we must hold' is extremely fuzzy. Similar considerations about the non-rational, and yet indispensable, nature of our most deeply held beliefs would later lead Wittgenstein to the same impasse:

If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body I should take him to be a half-wit. But I shouldn't know what it would mean to try to convince him that he had one.¹²⁶

Here we encounter an instance of an examination of sceptical concerns leading to a wider suggestion of the futility of argument. This theme will become central in the chapters to follow.

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), P.F. Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985), and Michael Williams *Unnatural Doubts* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd Ed, Rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 264.

³ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Nature*, ed. with introd. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd Ed., Rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 160.

⁴ Georges Dicker, *Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 5.

⁵ In the *Treatise* a further distinction is made, later dropped in the *Enquiry*, between complex and simple ideas. Whereby the former can be generated from a combination or alteration of simple impressions, a simple idea always corresponds with a simple impression. See *Treatise*, 1-7; *Enquiry*, 17-22. The crucial point is just that regardless of the complexity of an idea, it must be susceptible of being analyzed into simple impressions, or else the idea is shown to be "insignificant" or meaningless. See also, David Hume, "An Abstract of a Book Lately Published Entitled *A Treatise of Human Nature &c*," *A Treatise of Human Nature*," in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd Ed, Rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 648-649.

⁶ David Hume, "Abstract," 647.

⁷ Georges Dicker, *Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 9.

⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, 22.

⁹ Hume, "Abstract," *Treatise*, 648-649; *Enquiry*, 21-22.

¹⁰ Two traditional metaphysical issues, the nature of substance and the identity of the self, are put to the test. According to Hume, both fail to establish that they can be traced to source simple impressions, and are thus, according to his test for meaning, dismissed as inadequate terms for philosophical discussion.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that this distinction, which some have claimed, if accepted, sets us immediately on the road to scepticism, is first introduced in Section IV, which is entitled, "Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Understanding," 25-39.

¹² Hume, *Enquiry*, 25.

¹³ For a recent exploration of Hume's subtle reasoning about the relation between conceivability, contradiction, and possibility, see D. Tyckerium Lightner, "Hume on Conceivability and Inconceivability," *Hume Studies* 23 (1) (April 1997): 113-132.

¹⁴ Hume, *Enquiry*, 26.

¹⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, 26.

¹⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, 26.

¹⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, 27.

¹⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, 28.

¹⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 28-29.

²⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, 29.

²¹ Hume, *Treatise*, 87-88.

²² Hume, *Treatise*, 88.

²³ Hume, *Enquiry*, 32.

²⁴ Hume, *Enquiry*, 26.

²⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, 160.

²⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, 34.

²⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, 43-44.

²⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, 43.

²⁹ John Laird, *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature*. n.p. Archon Books, 1932.

Reprint, (n.p. Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1967), 185.

³⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, 31.

³¹ The succinct formulation of Hume's argument, including the quotation, comes from John Immerwahr, "A Sceptic's Progress: Hume's Preference for the First *Enquiry*," in *McGill Hume Studies. Proceedings of the McGill Bicentennial Hume Conference 1976*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robinson (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 234. He also notes there that this argument, which has puzzled many Hume scholars, is one of the few arguments present in the *Treatise* never to appear in Hume's later writings. As such, he suggests it may be in part, why Hume favoured the *Enquiry* over the *Treatise*.

³² Hume, *Treatise*, 187-218.

³³ Hume, *Treatise*, 187.

³⁴ Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 12. It should be noted that Williams does not think that this is proper way to understand Hume either.

³⁵ M.J. Ferreira, "Hume's Naturalism—'Proof' and 'Practice,'" Reprinted in *David Hume: Critical Assessments*. Volume III, ed. Stanley Tweyman (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 271.

³⁶ Hume recognized this limitation on consistent sceptics in the *Enquiry* where he wrote: "It may seem a very extravagant attempt of the sceptics to destroy *reason* by argument and ratiocination; yet is this the grand scope of all their enquiries and disputes," 155.

³⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, 187.

³⁸ Hume, *Treatise*, 183.

³⁹ Norman Kemp Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume (I)," in *David Hume: Critical Assessments*, Volume III, ed. Stanley Tweyman (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 213.

⁴⁰ Norman Kemp Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume (I)," 218.

⁴¹ R.W. Connon comments in "The Naturalism of Hume Revisited," *McGill Hume Studies. Proceedings of the McGill Bicentennial Hume Conference 1976*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robinson (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 121-145, that both Hume Bicentennial conferences in 1976 revealed that "there was already substantial agreement" about the importance of Hume's naturalism. As such, it was generally agreed, that the significance of Hume's scepticism should be tempered, even if not to the degree of Norman Kemp Smith's influential interpretation. See also, Nicholas Capaldi, "Introduction: The Problem of Hume and Hume's Problem," *McGill Hume Studies. Proceedings of the McGill Bicentennial Hume Conference 1976*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robinson (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 3-22.

⁴² Hume, *Treatise*, 187.

⁴³ I contend that inductive inferences are generally reliable, despite Russell's clever "chicken" example. See Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, with a new introduction by John Perry (n.p.: Home University Library, 1912; reprint, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63 (page citations are to the reprint edition). For, on the whole, if we consider our *reliance* on such inferences in the absence of our theoretical scruples, there is no denying that they are successful. There are considerable differences (barring an artificial or sceptical scenario that would put our lives in the hand of a farmer-of-humans) between our situation and that of a farm animal. Even taking into account that a human being's expectation to be alive tomorrow will eventually be mistaken, we are still *better off forming expectations about the future based on past experience than ceasing to do so*.

⁴⁴ His interpretation was advanced first in a series of articles in *Mind* in 1905, and later revised in his landmark study in 1941. See "The Naturalism of Hume (I)," and "The Naturalism of Hume (II)." Reprinted in *David Hume: Critical Assessments*. Volume III, ed. Stanley Tweyman, 207-228, 229-239. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. His book length treatment is *The Philosophy of David Hume*. London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd. 1941; Reprinted in 1960.

⁴⁵ See Thomas Hill Green, Introduction to *David Hume. The Philosophical Works*. Vol. 1, *A Treatise of Human Nature and Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by David Hume. London: n.p. 1886. Reprint, Germany: Scientia Verlag Aale, 1964 (page citations are to the reprint edition). Thomas Reid pioneered this view, but it only became enshrined as the orthodox view after T.H. Green, following Reid in large part, published his 300 page introduction to the 4 vol standard edition of Hume's works in 1886.

⁴⁶ For the complaint made many years ago, and specifically with reference to Hume studies, see Joseph Agassi, "A Note on Smith's Term 'Naturalism,'" in *David Hume: Critical Assessments*, Volume III, ed. Stanley Tweyman, (London and New York:

Routledge, 1995), 240-243. For a recent, more general account of the difficulty, see Robert Audi, "Philosophical Naturalism at the Turn of the Century," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 25 (2000), 27-45.

⁴⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, 474-475. See also, Miriam McCormick's discussion in "Hume on Natural Belief and Original Principles," *Hume Studies* 19 (1) (April 1994), 106ff.

⁴⁸ See W.V.O. Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," Reprinted in *Naturalizing Epistemology*, ed. Hilary Kornblith, (Cambridge, Mass.: A Bradford Book of the MIT Press, 1985), 15-30. For classic articles on this type of naturalism, see the rest of the collection, *Naturalizing Epistemology*, ed. Hilary Kornblith, (Cambridge, Mass.: A Bradford Book of the MIT Press, 1985). For more recent assessments, see Steven J. Wagner, and Richard Warner, ed, *Naturalism: A Critical Appraisal* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993). I will take up the prospects of naturalized epistemology in the final chapter.

⁴⁹ B. Winters, "Hume's Argument for the Superiority of Natural Instinct," Reprinted in *David Hume: Critical Assessments* Vol. III, ed. Stanley Tweyman (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 268. Although this assessment seems correct, it is in opposition to Hume's own stated position that what is natural cannot be deemed virtuous, nor what is unnatural, necessarily the source of vice. The reason to suggest that Hume holds this connection, in most instances (but especially in the *Enquiry*), and against his own explicit denial, is that he regularly puts into the mouth of Nature what he elsewhere prescribes himself. That he is more accepting of this in the *Enquiry* may provides further evidence for my earlier position that Hume is much more content with the Humean condition, which he finds stultifying in the *Treatise*.

⁵⁰ Hume refers to the natural configuration of our belief-forming mechanism as "fortunate" in the *Treatise*, 269. The second quotation comes from John Passmore, "Hume and the Ethics of Belief," in *David Hume: Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G. P. Morice (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 81.

⁵¹ See Richard Bett, "Scepticism and Everyday Attitudes in Ancient and Modern Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy* 24, no. 4 (October 1993), 363-381, for a re-evaluation, by way of qualification, of this commonly held view.

⁵² Laird, *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature*, 144.

⁵³ Hume, *Enquiry*, 22n.

⁵⁴ Kemp Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume (I)," 208.

⁵⁵ Hume, *Treatise*, 415.

⁵⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, 187.

⁵⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, 194-195.

⁵⁸ Hume, *Treatise*, 267.

⁵⁹ Hume, *Treatise*, 134.

⁶⁰ Hume, *Treatise*, 272.

⁶¹ Hume's relation to theories of truth is complex. In short, his tacit assumption of a correspondence theory, coupled with other aspects of his empiricist commitments generates the scepticism that his naturalistic view seeks to overcome. In short, Hume

makes repeated use of the empiricist assumption (without always recognizing it as such) that nothing can ever be present to the mind except impressions. So to suggest further that a proposition about one's sense data can be confirmed by anything else would not be possible. Hence, any question of correspondence is moot. With this avenue cut off, the gap between appearance and reality is firmly entrenched, and philosophical scepticism is inevitable. Not surprisingly, Hume does not concern himself with issues of "truth," and spends very little time considering his views relation to truth. I will return to this topic below, with specific reference to Hume's explanation of our apparent proclivity toward a so-called love of truth. See Pall S. Ardal "Some Implications of the Virtue of Reasonableness in Hume's Treatise," in *Hume: A Re-evaluation*, ed. Donald W. Livingston and James T. King, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 91-106, for a reading of Hume as a *de facto* correspondence theorist, who is nonetheless uninterested in truth as a criteria of belief-adequacy.

⁶² Hume, *Enquiry*, 50.

⁶³ Hume, *Treatise*, 94.

⁶⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, 95.

⁶⁵ Hume, "Abstract," 654.

⁶⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, 97.

⁶⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, 96.

⁶⁸ H.O. Mounce, *Hume's Naturalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999),

41.

⁶⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 149.

⁷⁰ Hume, *Treatise*, 183.

⁷¹ Hume, "Abstract," *Treatise*, 657; the second quotation, Hume, *Enquiry*, 160.

⁷² Hume, *Treatise*, 273.

⁷³ Competing interpretations on the relationship between Hume's view in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, are prevalent and complex, and nothing approximating consensus exists in the literature. The significance of the omissions, additions, and alterations that Hume made between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* are not likely resolvable by either Hume's own recommendation, nor by his commentators' various suggestions. Hume prefaced the *Enquiry* with a notice, disclaiming "*that juvenile work [the Treatise], which the author never acknowledged,*" and makes his position clear: "*Henceforth, the author desires, that the following Pieces [Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, and Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals] may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles.*" L.A. Selby-Bigge, in his introduction to the *Enquiry* offers several reasons why such an approach to Hume, pace Hume himself, cannot possibly do his work justice. For what was the first, and at the time, the most comprehensive comparison of their respective structures see L.A. Selby-Bigge, Introduction to *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and "Comparative Tables of the Contents of the *Treatise* and of the *Enquiries* and *Dissertation on the Passions*" in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge. 3rd ed., rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). But see also, Eric Steinberg,

Introduction to *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, by David Hume, ed. Eric Steinberg, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993); Donald Livingston, Introduction to *Hume: A Re-evaluation*, ed. Donald W. Livingston and James T. King (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976); James Noxon, *Hume's Philosophical Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Less developed suggestions about the relation between the two works can be found in almost any book or article on Hume. Not surprisingly, the emphasis laid on one or the other, seems to strongly influence the commentators eventual verdict of what Hume was up to, and whether he succeeded. Perhaps, it is an issue upon which no Hume scholar can remain entirely silent. There are even some who still hold the minority opinion, originally canvassed by Green, that there are no substantial differences in the overall view between the two books. Such a claim is about the only one in the debate that seems indefensible upon closer scrutiny. My interpretation offers the suggestion, at various points, that important metaphilosophical differences are evident between the projects envisaged in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*.

⁷⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, xiii.

⁷⁵ Hume, *Treatise*, xvi.

⁷⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, 14.

⁷⁷ David Hume, "Letter to Henry Home," in *The Letters of David Hume*, Vol. 1, ed. J.Y.T Grieg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932, 1969), 26. He puts almost the same words into his supposedly anonymous reviewer's mouth: "were his philosophy receiv'd, we must alter from the foundation the greatest part of the sciences," "Abstract," *Treatise*, 633.

⁷⁸ Hume, *Treatise*, xiv.

⁷⁹ L.A. Selby-Bigge, Introduction to *A Treatise Concerning Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), xiv.

⁸⁰ Hume, *Treatise*, xv, italics in original.

⁸¹ "Preface to the Abstract," *Treatise*, 644.

⁸² See, for instance, Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, Ch. 1, esp. 4. See also, Eric Steinberg, Introduction to *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, pp. xi-xv; John Immewhar, "A Skeptic's Progress: Hume's Preference for the First *Enquiry*," in *McGill Hume Studies. Proceedings of the McGill Bicentennial Hume Conference 1976*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robinson (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 227-238.

⁸³ James T. King, "Despair and Hope," 61.

⁸⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, xviii, emphasis added.

⁸⁵ James T. King captures this insight fully in "Despair and Hope in Hume's Introduction to the *Treatise of Human Nature*":

Hume's solution is ingenious: he asserts that skepticism is not only the occasion for the despair but its cure as well. His view is that despair, once experienced, produces in us almost the same effect as satiation, namely, the abatement of desire. [...] By a dialectical turn despair here operates on itself: the original desire

for knowledge, recognizing its inevitable unfulfillment, turns to despair, and this despair, grasping its source in human ignorance, transcends itself by altering the original unlimited desire and taking a form which reflects our limited condition, resulting in contentment. (64-65.)

⁸⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, 451.

⁸⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, 269; Hume, *Enquiry*, 160.

⁸⁸ These phrases are taken from Christopher J. Berry, *Hume, Hegel, and Human Nature* (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1982); quoted in Miriam McCormick, "Hume on Natural Belief and Original Principles." *Hume Studies* 19 (1) (April 1994): 108, 114n.

⁸⁹ Laird, *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature*, 180.

⁹⁰ Hume, *Treatise*, 266.

⁹¹ Hume, *Treatise*, xviii.

⁹² Hume, "Abstract," 646.

⁹³ Hume, *Enquiry*, 5-6.

⁹⁴ Hume, *Enquiry*, 9.

⁹⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, 9.

⁹⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, 16.

⁹⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, 9-10.

⁹⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, 9.

⁹⁹ Hume, *Treatise*, 268.

¹⁰⁰ The "trivial properties" of the imagination are contrasted with the "general and established properties" of the imagination. In short, the latter are involved in supplying us with causal judgments, and can be trusted, while the former are unreliable, and tend to generate illusions and falsehood. For a further discussion of this distinction, see John Immerwahr, "A Sceptic's Progress: Hume's Preference for the First *Enquiry*," in *McGill Hume Studies. Proceedings of the McGill Bicentennial Hume Conference 1976*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robinson (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 227-238, especially 230-233.

¹⁰¹ Hume, *Treatise*, 268.

¹⁰² For an account of Hume's own disappointment with his project in the *Treatise*, see John Immerwahr, "The Failure of Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 2 (1) November 1976): 57-71.

¹⁰³ Hume, *Enquiry*, 162.

¹⁰⁴ Hume, *Enquiry*, 165.

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas Capaldi, "Introduction: The Problem of Hume and Hume's Problem," in *McGill Hume Studies. Proceedings of the McGill Bicentennial Hume Conference 1976*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robinson (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 6.

¹⁰⁶ Mounce, *Hume's Naturalism*, 49. Hume, writing anonymously about the *Treatise* in the "Abstract," makes a similar point: "By all that has been said the reader will easily perceive, that the philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding,"

Treatise, 657. However, I would contend that Hume is not *equating* scepticism with “the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding.” Rather, he is acknowledging what “the reader” will *likely* “perceive.” Further, if we read the “and” as separating two distinct clauses in a list, rather than linking the two clauses (i.e. the second as an enlargement of the first) then we can keep straight Hume’s distinction between philosophical scepticism about reason, rational justification, etc. and his overall view of human beings as capable of assenting to beliefs reliably generated through natural means.

¹⁰⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, title page.

¹⁰⁸ See, for instance, R.W. Connon, “The Naturalism of Hume Revisited.”

¹⁰⁹ As a notable exception, see John Immerwahr, “The Failure of Hume’s *Treatise*.”

¹¹⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, 159.

¹¹¹ Hume, *Treatise*, 273.

¹¹² Hume, *Enquiry*, 142, emphasis added.

¹¹³ For Hume’s purpose, possible experience serves as a logical limit. No distinction is necessary between (a) actual experience, (b) possible but non-actual experience. Simply put, anything beyond the possible realm of experience (whether we know this limit or not) is the limiting factor in our inquiries.

¹¹⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, 271-272.

¹¹⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, 155n, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, 150. Hume also considers indirect benefits of studying philosophy (and its modesty-inducing encounter with scepticism) on page 10.

¹¹⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, 159.

¹¹⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, 152.

¹¹⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 160.

¹²⁰ Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 12.

¹²¹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 159-160, emphasis in original. Hume makes the same point regarding the ancient sceptics: “But a PYRRHONIAN cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society,” 160.

¹²² David Hume, “Letter to Henry Home,” in *The Letters of David Hume*, Vol. 1, ed. J.Y.T Grieg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932, 1969), 26.

¹²³ Pall S. Ardal, “Some Implications of the Virtue of Reasonableness in Hume’s *Treatise*” in *Hume: A Re-evaluation*, ed. D. Livingston and J. King, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 105.

¹²⁴ See Ardal, “The Virtue of Reasonableness,” 91-106.

¹²⁵ Ardal, “The Virtue of Reasonableness,” 101.

¹²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 257.

CHAPTER 3: Scepticism and Contemporary Epistemology

3.1 The Influence of Hume, and the Significance of Barry Stroud and Michael Williams

The publication of Barry Stroud's *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (1984) galvanized the community of epistemologists. In that book, he defends what he calls the "conditional correctness" of scepticism. The argument is that *if* we grant the aims, methods, and assumptions of traditional philosophy, *then* we will be unable to satisfactorily explain how we come to know anything about the world. This stood counter to a prevalent trend that dismissed the possibility of taking scepticism as a final verdict on the possibility of human knowledge, and had therefore diminished the value of investigating such a possibility. Michael Williams points out that the recent trend toward prominent epistemologists acknowledging what Stroud has called the "conditional correctness" of scepticism, marks an important shift away from the view that held sway for much of the twentieth century. The confluence of positivistic, pragmatic, Wittgensteinian, and ordinary language trends in philosophy had made serious discussion about scepticism a pariah for at least a couple of philosophical generations. The common element in those schools' approaches was to accuse the sceptical challenge of resting on some sort of conceptual incoherence, linguistic meaninglessness, or patently misguided epistemological aim.

There is a very basic consideration, agreed upon by Stroud and Williams, to motivate taking scepticism more seriously than those diagnoses suggest. Simply put, *we do seem to understand* quite well what scepticism means, and how it purports to rob us of

the possibility of explaining how knowledge in general is possible. Substantiating the charge of meaninglessness or incoherence will clash with the very consideration that leads to the force of the challenge of scepticism in the first place: the apparent intuitive plausibility which leads from standard epistemological analyses of knowledge to the conclusion that we cannot secure knowledge in general at all. In fact, the increasingly subtle theories purporting to diffuse scepticism are often more difficult to comprehend than the seemingly straightforward case that can be made for the truth of scepticism. Whatever is incorrect about scepticism as a theory of knowledge, or more specifically, whatever is mistaken about our epistemological project that leads to the triumph of scepticism, must be much more subtle and nuanced, according to Stroud and Williams, than the diagnoses which have become familiar. With prominent figures like Barry Stroud, Thomas Nagel, P.F. Strawson, and W.V. Quine all acknowledging, to varying degrees, the strength of Hume's account concerning the intimate relation between scepticism and philosophical reflection, there is a renewed interest in once again *learning something valuable from the sceptical challenge*. The constant challenge will be to remain open to whatever possibilities present themselves when we undertake this investigation. Stroud's general contribution to the debate was to encourage epistemologists to concede that whatever is unacceptable with scepticism as a theory of knowledge, it is not possible to dismiss the challenge out of hand. Stroud led the shift toward taking scepticism seriously again. It is at least not obvious, Stroud insists, where scepticism distorts the traditional epistemological project. More subversively, he sometimes hints at the possibility that the sceptical conclusion is not a distortion at all of

the traditional epistemological project. In those radical moments, he seems to suggest scepticism simply is the proper conclusion to draw from the aims and constraints of the traditional project. But more importantly, he adds, “I think the best thing to do now is to look much more closely and critically at the very enterprise of which scepticism or one of its rivals is the outcome: the task of philosophical theory of knowledge itself.”¹ I will pursue this radical strain in Stroud’s work, without ignoring the tension inevitably involved with any proposal to revise or abandon a seemingly reasonable enterprise.

Stroud’s partial vindication of the sceptical challenge stems from his claim, similar to Hume’s, that the outcome of philosophical reflection on the possibility of human knowledge (at least as conceived of in post-Cartesian, modern terms) will *naturally* and *inevitably* lead to scepticism. That is, scepticism, taken as the position that “nobody knows anything, or that nobody has good reason to believe anything,”² follows from the attempt to reflect philosophically on the question of how knowledge is at all possible. This follows from seeing scepticism as stemming from a few basic epistemological concepts that are accepted by anyone familiar with the traditional enterprise, or more basically, our ordinary conception of knowledge. This is a key point to which Williams objects. Williams recognizes that if scepticism is granted the rhetorical advantage of being derived from natural considerations and intuitions we all share about knowledge, then the hope of blocking the path toward scepticism recedes toward a vanishing point. But since, like Hume, Stroud is convinced that there is undeniable value in our everyday knowledge claims, philosophical scepticism might tell us something more, not necessarily about our relation to the world, but about our traditional conception

of epistemology, including its core modern ideals of detachment, objectivity, totality, and generality. For Stroud, a closer examination of the strength of the sceptical challenge promises to “reveal something deep or important about human knowledge or human nature or the urge to understand them philosophically.”³ He admits that he fails to accomplish this in *Significance*, or at least he never “manage[s] to state precisely what the lesson or moral of a study of philosophical scepticism might be.”⁴ My analysis will suggest that the lesson from Stroud’s book, and his subsequent articles which continued to develop the program set out in *Significance*, is best understood as calling into question in a fundamental way the value and stability of our traditional conception of a theory of knowledge. I want to push the possibility that the lesson of scepticism for epistemology in general may very well be to call into question the viability of the traditional project itself.

The broad outlines of Hume’s approach to understanding human knowledge continue to influence the direction of contemporary epistemology. The two features that have been intensively developed in recent decades are naturalism, and reliabilism (taken as a theory of justification, or perhaps more accurately, as a modification or replacement of traditional requirements for justification). Both of these features constitute departures from the traditional epistemological project. They will be discussed in Chapter 4. Michael Williams, however, contends that Hume’s most pervasive contemporary influence is not one of substance, but one of attitude. Hume’s legacy to contemporary epistemology, according to Williams, is his pessimism with regard to the possibility of constructing a non-sceptical theory of knowledge. Williams’ self-styled optimism, on the other hand,

contends that “this pessimism results from a tendency to seriously underestimate the theoretical resources necessary to generate a sceptical conclusion about our knowledge of the external world.”⁵ To view scepticism as the natural result of any theoretical reflection on human knowledge is to concede that it is generated from “what seems like nothing more than the merest platitudes”⁶ about knowledge. For Williams, this points toward a promising anti-sceptical strategy: it must be shown that what Barry Stroud calls “platitudes we would all accept,”⁷ are actually “vehicles for problematic and highly theoretical ideas.”⁸ Pessimism, then, is seen to stem from viewing the path to theoretical scepticism as inevitable, that is, following from natural considerations (or unalterable intuitions) about knowledge. What is required to curtail this attitude, according to Williams, is a “theoretical diagnosis” that will expose the theoretical baggage of this allegedly intuitive and inevitable journey toward scepticism.⁹

Williams presents his primary aim as redistributing the burden of theory away from the positive epistemologist’s shoulders, at least partially onto the sceptic’s. Since theories of knowledge are often more complex than the considerations favouring scepticism, Williams thinks he must show how scepticism is at least as theoretically loaded as positive epistemologies. For Hume or Stroud, scepticism is the natural result of philosophy because it follows from basic, theoretically innocent considerations. Williams need not accept this picture if he can dispute the claim common to Hume, Stroud and others, who contend that scepticism is the natural result of thinking philosophically about knowledge of the external world. Natural, in this sense, is opposed to theoretical. Because if scepticism arises out of a background of theoretical commitments rather than intuitive

understandings of “platitudes we all accept” and “obvious truths,” the place to push the sceptical argument off track could be in questioning those prior commitments. Thus,

the New Scepticism forces us to confront a vital question [. . .] ‘Is scepticism really a natural or intuitive problem?’ If it is, then Hume is right, and we will never reconcile everyday attitudes with the results of philosophical reflection.¹⁰

But, of course, the point of Williams’ work is to show that Hume and the “New Sceptics” are not right. For Williams, this is not a matter of simply reconstructing and defending previous analyses, but rather to show how the doctrine of “epistemological realism” underlies foundationalism and provides the context in which scepticism has thrived. We can cease to be pessimistic epistemologists, Williams contends, when we recognize that scepticism is not the natural and inevitable conclusion to reflecting on knowledge.

The self-conscious aim of his diagnosis of scepticism is to help us conceptualize the relationship between our philosophical and ordinary understanding of knowledge in a way that differs from Hume’s “biperspectival” account. In short, Hume’s view is taken to be that scepticism triumphs on the strict theoretical or philosophical level, although for psychological or practical reasons, we are unable to live the truth of scepticism in everyday life. Williams, on the other hand, wants to suggest that a properly contextualized view of knowledge and justification allows us to avoid viewing ordinary knowledge as an impoverished and intrinsically inferior cousin of the more robust, fully justified ideal of knowledge. Hume tells us that the ideal of a philosophically satisfying theory of knowledge is forever beyond our reach, since philosophical reflection itself reveals that rational justification can never be provided for our most deeply held beliefs. Williams responds that it is only on the dubious assumption that ordinary contexts stand

in this fixed, impoverished relationship to epistemological inquiry that supports the idea that the failure of traditional epistemology is equivalent to the discovery that knowledge is impossible.

Williams categorizes a number of prominent epistemologists, including Stroud, as “New Humeans.” He applies this label to those who accept what Williams considers to be Hume’s misguided account of the relation between our everyday outlook and our reflective, philosophical stance. The contested point is not that ordinary and epistemological inquiries provide different conclusions about knowledge. The further suggestion in Hume and the other “New Sceptics” (or “New Humeans” as Williams also calls them) is that since the epistemological result is more rigorous or pure, it can be seen to hold (strictly speaking) even in situations, like the majority of ones we encounter in everyday situations, in which for various practical reasons we attribute ‘knowledge’ in some qualified or loose sense. On such a view, ordinary attributions of knowledge in everyday life never really amount to belief that is worthy of being called knowledge, since they lack the requisite rational justification. One of Williams’ strategies for blocking the spread of scepticism across the board is to attempt to show why this view of the relation between philosophical and everyday knowledge claims stand in this relation is mistaken. That is, Williams wants to block the move that allows the conclusions of inquiry in one context (epistemological inquiry) to be extended and imposed as the standard of justification for other inquiries. This is because, according to Williams, there can be no inquiry that does not create its own context; and in so doing, each context creates particular “methodological necessities”¹¹ for that particular inquiry. The mistake,

we are told, is in the attempt to discover what context-invariant strictures concerning inquiry exist apart from the particular exigencies that arise in any given form of inquiry. If scepticism is to be seen as the proper verdict on our knowledge, it will be isolated to the peculiar realm of epistemology, where certain methodological constraints and requirements are imposed by the context of inquiry, not the nature of human knowledge in a privileged or strict sense.

Another element in Williams attempt to overturn Hume's conception of the relation between philosophical scepticism and ordinary belief is to call into question just how simple and intuitive the considerations that give rise to scepticism really are. Williams wants to expose, as theory-laden, the alleged intuitive or natural considerations which lead to the rise and *spread* of scepticism. For once the naturalness of the path to scepticism is disputed, the possibility for avoiding that route becomes open to epistemologists. If scepticism arises from "pre-theoretical" features of our ordinary notion of knowledge, then any purported response that denies these "platitudes" will seem strained and counterintuitive—at least more so than the considerations which favour scepticism anyway. I will trace, and criticize, Williams' attempt to derive a satisfactory response to scepticism from claims about the theory-laddenedness of certain considerations leading to, and underlying, the sceptical challenge. The concern is that Williams takes the discovery that something is dependent on theoretical assumptions for the stronger claim that this discredits or makes expendable the underlying theory and the set of problems it fuels.

I argued in the last chapter that it would be mistaken to continue to regard Hume's sole contribution to epistemology, pace T.H. Green, as having been a *reductio ad absurdum* of an empiricist account of human knowledge. Such an interpretation ignores the considerable positive content of Hume's view (specifically his naturalistic theory of belief). I contend that Hume's critical metaphilosophy has a much wider target regarding the nature of argumentation and rational justification. There is certainly a strong undercurrent in the contemporary debate about scepticism that revolves around a largely unarticulated possibility that the traditional epistemological enterprise is somehow incoherent or absurd as a whole. The paradox is that while epistemology *aims* to explain how knowledge of the world is possible (or how we can justify our belief in such a world), the project *results* in the conclusion that knowledge is not possible at all. Granted, the requirements of what counts as a philosophically justified account of our knowledge can be seen to diverge from what ordinarily counts as knowing, or being justified in claiming to know in everyday situations. But this is largely irrelevant to our concern of examining the epistemological project. No one denies that we ordinarily claim knowledge for ourselves, and attribute it to others. We may do this because it is required for practical reasons, or simply because it does not occur to ask someone if they have ruled out various sceptical counter-possibilities to their knowledge claim. In fact, Hume enshrines this very difference between ordinary and philosophical outlooks in his overall view. So this cannot help us around the problem of philosophical scepticism; it merely states the problem as recognized by sceptical and non-sceptical epistemologists alike. What Williams objects to is the suggestion that the results of epistemological inquiry should be

considered the final word on human knowledge. Every kind of inquiry creates its own context, and hence, appeals to certain criteria of satisfaction; it is only by regarding traditional epistemology as the paragon of “presuppositionless” or “pure” inquiry,¹² that we are led to view the results of epistemological inquiry as binding on all of our knowledge. For all of this, there is no disputing that different standards are in play when attributing knowledge in an ordinary as opposed to a philosophical sense. The question becomes how these different senses of knowing are related.

The deficiency in appeals to ordinary attributions of knowledge as a strategy for avoiding global scepticism is that they do not touch the philosophical aspiration of providing a completely general assessment of our knowledge as a whole.¹³ Such a project stipulates that one cannot assume any specific piece of knowledge about the world in trying to justify the general proposition, ‘There exists a world of material objects beyond the existence of my consciousness.’ It is not that this lack counts against ordinary knowledge claims, or what is sometimes called knowledge-for-all-practical-purposes. This ordinary or everyday sense of knowing is presumed to be well understood. As members of the same society or language community we know quite well what is accepted and what is challenged when putting forth evidence for knowledge claims. Moreover, in ordinary settings, we are all aware of what sorts of claims are not even pressed for justification at all. Recognizing that different goals are being aimed at, and that different conditions must be satisfied in ordinary as opposed to philosophical accounts of knowledge, should motivate our interest in examining further which requirements or conditions are put on philosophical accounts of knowledge—and what

justifies them. Further, we should ask about the relation between epistemological inquiry into knowledge, and other kinds of interests we have about knowledge. Hume, Williams reminds us, suggests that only “carelessness and inattention” breaks the hold of Pyrrhonian sceptical doubt. Hume’s theoretical scepticism does not diminish his interest in explaining how we do nevertheless come to form, and tenaciously cling to, certain beliefs. We usually consider these beliefs knowledge, even though on examination, they are found to be lacking rational justification. Even though we ordinarily claim to have knowledge, and attribute it to others, it is only because we are not there and then conscious of our more reasoned scruples against the possibility of justification.

Our habit of forgetting about our rationally arrived at conclusions can hardly be a satisfactory “solution” to the problem of scepticism. I will examine below Williams’ diagnosis of the main obstacle impeding the recognition that scepticism is not a completely natural or intuitive response to the question of how our knowledge of the world in general is possible. He traces the root of scepticism to what he considers a pervasive and malignant theoretical doctrine, which he calls “epistemological realism.” While there may be some value to tracing the root of the sceptical conclusion to a level below a commitment to foundationalism as a theory of justification (and its attendant problematic notion of epistemic priority), it is not clear what alternative Williams can genuinely endorse in their place. Below I will examine Williams’ qualified endorsement of contextualism as an alternate theory of justification. Whatever its advantages, it remains unclear how contextualism can hope to answer the traditional question concerning the possibility of justifying all of our knowledge all at once. When Williams

suggests that his aim is to discredit the notion that a question like the one that points to this traditional goal can be coherently asked, he courts the charge of revising the core concepts, aim, and requirements of epistemology to a point where he has merely changed the subject. Concluding that scepticism is not a threat, but traditional epistemology is impossible, does not seem like a decisive victory—if it should be counted as a non-sceptical view at all. In Chapter 4, I will assess the difficulties that arise from taking seriously a concern for distinguishing what should count as traditional versus revisionary philosophy, or continuing the conversation versus changing the subject.

Although he is not a sceptic, Stroud does not offer a positive strategy for overcoming scepticism; nor does he endorse any particular kind of theory of knowledge that might hold the answer. His reticence to endorse any positive strategy in *Significance* stems from his suspicion that “the problem has no solution.”¹⁴ He nevertheless follows his hunch that something valuable may result from examining the paradoxical suggestion that the result of trying to understand *how* knowledge is possible comes to the conclusion that it is not possible at all. Even though scepticism is believed to be unbelievable or at least impracticable, examining the relation between traditional epistemology and scepticism may “nevertheless reveal something deep or important about human knowledge or human nature or the urge to understand them philosophically.”¹⁵ Of the possible lessons Stroud enumerates above, I think the most likely outcome will have to do with our “urge” to understand phenomena like human nature and human knowledge “philosophically,” rather than teaching us “something deep or important” about human nature or human knowledge in themselves. The further question of how we might go

about satisfactorily revising the metaphilosophical principles that give rise to our aspirations is left untouched by Stroud—as it is by almost everyone who has followed his provocation to try to determine the significance of scepticism. In his rare, radical moments Stroud even suggests that scepticism may lead us to abandon or revise our traditional conception of the epistemological task. This is the thread I want to emphasize and explore. I will show that it can be teased out of his programmatic statements in *Significance*, and comes closest to explicit fruition in “Scepticism, ‘Externalism’, and the Goal of Epistemology.”¹⁶ In this way, I will draw an additional parallel between Hume and Stroud, both of whom seem to resist the revisionary implications their views could hold for our metaphilosophical understanding of the fundamental aspirations and task of epistemology.

This once again poses the issues that troubled our acceptance of the revisionist undertones in Hume: To what extent can we revise traditional epistemological concepts, like belief, justification, and objectivity? By what criteria can we judge epistemological concepts to be more or less acceptable? Added to these concerns is Williams’ insistence that the prospect of any sort of significant revision of core epistemological intuitions faces us with “the epistemologist’s dilemma”:

We can either accept scepticism, or make changes in our pre-theoretical thinking about knowledge that shrink the domain, or alter the status of what we previously thought of as knowledge of objective fact. In making such changes, however, we inevitably appear to be making very large concessions to the sceptic. Unkindly put, the epistemologist’s dilemma is that we can either agree with the sceptic directly, or in a roundabout, grudging way [. . .].¹⁷

If these two options really do exhaust the possibilities, and if we really are wedged in as firmly between these two alternatives as Stroud and Williams often suggest, then we will

have to concede at least the standing vulnerability of epistemology to sceptical challenges—and probably more.

Stroud's primary concern is to impress upon epistemologists the peculiar nature of the demand for a philosophical understanding of knowledge. Contrary to the popular objection that scepticism misrepresents the nature of knowledge, Stroud argues that philosophers who have claimed to see their way past or around scepticism are guilty of the charges of distortion or misunderstanding. Stroud's analyses of Moore, Carnap, Kant, and Quine reveal this similar pattern: either the epistemologist misunderstands the force of scepticism and defeats a weaker version of the sceptical challenge, or else, they offer an alternate account that abandons, say, our ordinary understanding of objectivity, so that the account must admit to failure, if success is to be deemed the justification of the understanding of knowledge that we traditionally seek. According to Stroud, what marks our attempt to understand knowledge in a philosophical way is a concern with knowing things in a suitably general way. This is contrasted with the particular pursuit of any particular piece of knowledge that we look for in our ordinary, daily lives. Stroud summarizes the nature of our traditional philosophical interest in knowledge this way:

We want a general answer to the question. It should be expressed in a general "way of knowing." And we find that general source in what we call "the senses" or "sense-perception." The problem then is to explain how we can get any knowledge at all of the world around us on the basis of sense-perception.¹⁸

This is to introduce the problematic notion of "the epistemic priority of sensory experience over knowledge of the world." This is the familiar sceptical problem generated by asking how, on the basis of sensory experience (which shows itself to be prone to illusion, and at the very least, is bound to be perspectival), we could ever hope to

secure knowledge of an objective world. What connection or what inference can possibly satisfy us that how things appear accurately represents how things are, given our recognition of at least a logical gap between sense experience and how the world may really be? In fact, although Stroud cannot see his way around this problem, he suggests that this “familiar and powerful line of thinking by which all of our alleged knowledge of the world gets even temporarily split off at once from what we get in perception”¹⁹ is the very stage at which, scepticism, if it can be avoided, must be blocked.

Again, Stroud rests here without making any positive proposal as to how we might revise what he acknowledges is a *problematic shared assumption*. He acknowledges that scepticism must follow from the traditional epistemological project, “given what it takes to be the facts of human perception.”²⁰ However, he does not pursue the suggestion given in the same paper, namely, that we will never have to accept that scepticism is ultimately correct, since we can take any sceptical outcome to prove “at most that human knowledge or the human condition must be understood in some other way.” Stroud, it seems, recognizes that fundamental revision of what we take to be the inherited epistemological project is required to avoid scepticism; however, he cannot get over his nagging intuition about intellectual satisfaction, which suggests that failing to find a positive traditional answer will feel unsatisfactory no matter how convinced we can become that something “natural but subtly distorted,”²¹ lurks behind the rationale of the traditional project. Since no definitive refutation of scepticism has succeeded, nor has any diagnosis pinpointed what is subtly distorted or amiss with the traditional demand, Stroud remains content to draw the moral that dissatisfaction is the only possible outcome

for those who continue to pursue philosophical theories of knowledge. So to overcome scepticism in the right way, for Stroud, means constructing an account that does not lead to scepticism as the traditional account does, but without denying any of the given “uncontroversial facts about the world and about human resources and capacities,”²² nor “the kind of objectivity we already make very good sense of.”²³ The very outline of this task seems to suggest the impossibility of its achievement: one must both adhere to the constraints of the scepticism-plagued traditional project, and yet resist its sceptical conclusion.

I want to acknowledge Stroud’s influence as a catalyst in sparking much of the past twenty years of lively debate about scepticism, but in a cautionary way. I will argue that Stroud’s siren song (“I can’t get no satisfaction”) is the result of a strict (sometimes unwitting) adherence to the traditional (that is, modern) conception of the epistemological project. In Chapter 2, I argued that Hume succeeded (more so in the *Enquiry*) in detaching himself enough from the traditional epistemological task of finding a completely general, justificatory account of our most deeply held beliefs to find satisfaction in his naturalistic account of human nature—albeit with some signs of residual discomfort. This anxiety seemed to stem from both the recognition of the ultimate bankruptcy of philosophy and rational argument to secure our most deeply held beliefs, and also the trepidation he may have felt about altering the metaphilosophical foundations of the scope of inquiry. Since Hume lacked Descartes’ recourse to God, and lacked Descartes’ apparent comfort with circular argumentation, Hume rejected (at least in part) Descartes’ demand for global justification for how our beliefs can be seen to

secure our external world. Instead of Hume seeing this as failure on his part to supply an empiricist account able to satisfy Descartes' rationalistic epistemological goal, he instead found intellectual satisfaction from *revising* not only certain epistemological intuitions at play, but more importantly, revising the very scope of what inquiry could hope to account for. This is the path that Stroud's investigations often seem to suggest to him, but which he nevertheless refuses to pursue. Despite scattered comments on his part to suggest that he is willing to follow his investigation where ever it takes him—even to the extent of questioning “[w]hether there could ever be such a thing as a general account we would be willing to call ‘a theory of knowledge’ [...]”²⁴—Stroud is ultimately unwilling or unable to turn his back on the tradition. That is, he refuses to think that we could be satisfied with an epistemology that altered, in any significant way, the requirements that he thinks are placed on epistemologists by the tradition they inherit. I will trace this to a conflation on his part between what is deeply-rooted and therefore natural (in Hume's sense of stemming from human nature), and what is deeply-rooted and therefore seemingly inevitable, *but only as a result of its status in the tradition*. By mistaking what is deeply-seated in our philosophical tradition, for what may be deeply-rooted in human nature Stroud is forced to insist that we could never gain satisfaction by recognizing the impossibility of the traditional demand of epistemology. It is important to look closely at the parameters of Stroud's investigation (especially the boundaries which he suggests cannot be transgressed), since he intended *Significance* to be programmatic, and it undoubtedly set the stage for the ensuing debate.

Williams' parting words in *Unnatural Doubts* maintain that "[t]he Humean condition and the human condition are not the same." Furthermore, he maintains it is only this misidentification that recommends pessimism about our overall prospects in epistemology. I will argue below that Williams fails to get significantly past the conclusions of Hume and Stroud. He is unable to establish how his purported alternative can avoid conceptualizing our relation to the world in a way that is both *different enough* to avoid the problems inherent in the traditional project, but *similar enough* to be recognized as a satisfactory positive epistemology, rather than a concessive alteration of what are recognized as the requirements and aspirations of the traditional epistemological project. I will suggest below that even if we agree with Williams' diagnosis of the theoretical doctrine (epistemological realism) underlying philosophical scepticism, he still faces two difficulties: (1) Even if he does discover a problematic theoretical doctrine underlying traditional epistemology, he must show how we can do without it; (2) He should be able to motivate our adoption of his favoured alternative theory of justification, contextualism, in such a way as to remain continuous with the concerns of traditional epistemology, or else face the charge of having merely changed the subject. The time has come to take a closer look at what criteria of satisfaction are being appealed to, and what role they play, in the contemporary debate.

3.2 Criteria of Satisfaction

The literature concerning the relation of scepticism to knowledge abounds with talk of "satisfaction." What conditions must be satisfied to provide a legitimate account of how we know anything at all? What is required from a theory of knowledge to satisfy

our traditional epistemological aspirations? Since I am concerned with evaluating the attitude that contemporary epistemologists hold toward the possibility of ever constructing a satisfactory theory of knowledge, I want to call attention to the criteria of satisfaction involved in judging the adequacy of proposed theories. This, it would seem, is a necessary, though often overlooked, preliminary step to assessing whether we should be “pessimistic” or otherwise about the past, present, and future of constructing philosophically reflective theories of knowledge.

The following proposed classification scheme is no more precise than the discussions from which it is derived. This is to be expected, since criteria of satisfaction are usually not articulated, and ultimately, (as I will argue in Chapter 4) any attempt to rigidly categorize criteria of satisfaction will face considerable, fundamental resistance. In order to serve as a guide to this discussion, I will distinguish between three separable types of criteria usually imposed on accounts: (1) Conditions inherited from modern epistemologists (particularly Descartes and Hume) about what should be required of a theory of knowledge in terms of the desired scope of explanation and method of inquiry, (2) Formal criteria of argumentative and theoretical adequacy, which are usually recognized as binding on rationality since antiquity; and (3) Intuition-driven criteria of intellectual satisfaction. I will offer examples of each of these types of conditions, and explain how they serve as criteria of satisfaction in the debate about scepticism.

(1) Contemporary theories are still judged by conditions that emerged in the investigations of modern epistemologists (most notably in Descartes and Hume). Stroud often refers to “the traditional epistemological project” or “the traditional question” to

which epistemologists continue to seek a satisfactory response. Without fixing more exactly what is meant by the traditional project, or the nature of its characteristic question, we will struggle to understand what goal we are aiming at. Furthermore, we will not be able to make sense of the complicated issues surrounding what it means to remain within the tradition as opposed to taking a revisionary stance. Williams approves of Stroud's characterization of the traditional project in the following terms:

The traditional Cartesian examination aims at an assessment of all of our knowledge of the world all at once, and it takes the form of a judgment on that knowledge made from what looks like a detached 'external' position.²⁵

From this description we can derive three conditions of satisfaction which shape the scope of the traditional question concerning the assessment of knowledge of the external world. The totality condition, as Williams calls it, requires that we account for "all of our knowledge [...] all at once." The condition of detachment demands that no particular knowledge claim be utilized in explaining the possibility of how all knowledge is to be accounted for (in other words, we must detach ourselves from reliance on ordinary attributions of knowledge for the purpose of capturing the possibility of all knowledge at once). We are thus blocked from appealing to any part of our putative knowledge for the purpose of justifying our grasp on knowledge in general. It is not always clear how these two requirements are to be kept apart theoretically or practically. Not surprisingly, Williams concludes that they are really one in the same condition.²⁶ The key point to recognize is that the traditional project seems to paint us into a corner whereby to explain the possibility of all knowledge, we are unable to assume any particular piece of it. Also, we must detach ourselves from the usual practical considerations that lead us to attribute

knowledge (in a loose sense) in everyday situations. Contained within the phrase “aims at an assessment,” is the notion that the explanation we seek must somehow *justify* our claim to know with respect to an external world. Ernest Sosa captures this aspect by suggesting that the traditional epistemologist is looking for a “legitimizing” account.²⁷ The traditional epistemological project is concerned both with explaining how knowledge as a general phenomena is possible at all, and how we can justify the fact that we distinguish between “knowledge” and lesser doxastic positions. This is closely connected with Williams’ claim that “the traditional project is evaluative in intent [...]”²⁸

A further requirement of the modern conception is that the assessment must yield information about an “objective” world, which is knowledge “that holds quite independently of our knowing it [...]” Stroud is content with the vagueness in his description of the notion of objectivity, since he is outlining a view “[he] thinks we all understand,” in short because “we have the same conception of objectivity.”²⁹ Let us examine briefly the positive reasons put forward for the case of objectivity, traditionally understood.

The sceptical philosopher’s conception [...] is a quest for an objective or detached understanding and explanation of the position we are objectively in. What is seen to be true from a detached ‘external’ standpoint might not correspond to what we take to be the truth about our position when we consider it ‘internally’ [...] Philosophical scepticism says the two [perspectives] do not correspond [...]. I think we do have a conception of things being a certain way quite independently of their being known or believed or said to be that way by anyone. I think the source of the philosophical problem of the external world lies somewhere within just such a conception of an objective world, or in our desire, expressed in term of that conception, to gain a certain kind of understanding of our relation to the world.³⁰

He begins by referring to the “sceptical philosopher’s conception” by which he actually means the conception shared by all traditional epistemologists. Williams also regularly equates the assumptions, concerns, and methodological approach of “the traditional epistemologist” with “the sceptic.” So the relationship between these specific requirements of the traditional epistemological project and the sceptical outcome appears to take on a peculiar nature: we are constrained to accept apparent facts about our epistemic situation, even though we are aware that *given these constraints* we are led toward scepticism. For the problem as Stroud and Williams see it, is that it is almost obligatory to follow the sceptical philosopher’s reasoning *if* we start from his or her way of describing our epistemic situation. What is most troubling, according to Stroud, is that *we all* share that starting point:

But in trying to describe that conception I think I have relied on nothing but platitudes we would all accept [...]. If those platitudes about objectivity do indeed express the conception of the world and our relation to it that the sceptical philosopher relies on, and if I am right in thinking that scepticism can be avoided only if that conception is rejected, it will seem that in order to try to avoid scepticism we must deny platitudes we all accept.³¹

In other words, we cannot hope to avoid scepticism if we accept key traditional epistemic concepts. But neither can we simply reject these concepts, unless it can be shown that they are faulty on independent grounds. Notice however that Stroud never asserts that the traditional account of our epistemic situation is correct. He always rests his arguments on conditional claims, to the effect that *if* we accept the traditional picture, we will end in sceptical frustration. Add to this Stroud’s refusal to propose any alternative conceptualization, and his occasional indication that it would be “very difficult to free oneself from that conception or to see how or why it cannot be correct,”³²

and we see both why Stroud thinks we are doomed to dissatisfaction, and what leads Williams to label him “pessimistic.” Williams agrees that if his theoretical diagnosis is to succeed, he must not deny something as epistemologically cherished as objectivity itself. The important constraint that objectivity places on a satisfactory account of our knowledge about the external world is that it nullifies idealist or phenomenalist accounts. To the extent that this might seem to disqualify philosophers like Berkeley or Kant, it should be understood that this is indeed a prevalent attitude among contemporary epistemologists. Idealism, and more generally anti-realist strategies, notoriously fail to satisfy our desire for a robust conception of an external world. That is, the demand for knowledge of an objective world (the world as it would be apart from human consciousness) disqualifies any attempt to block scepticism by rejecting the gap between appearance and reality by means of settling for the reality of appearances only. Williams thinks we can and should retain the notion of objectivity. He must challenge something deeper about the very notion that there is something like “our epistemic situation” or “our knowledge of the external world” which can hoped to be assessed objectively or otherwise.

For Stroud and Williams, all of this comes together in seeing the traditional epistemological project as a quest for a *completely general* account of the possibility of having knowledge, which assesses all of our knowledge all at once from a detached, objective point of view. So to summarize the agreed-upon conditions derived from the modern tradition, a satisfactory account will answer the question whether we can provide a *completely general* account of the totality of our knowledge, taken from an objective

and detached perspective (both in the sense of not being reliant on particular knowledge claims and also not concerned with practical, everyday concerns). This response will have to be justificatory in nature, in that it must legitimize our claim to ever have knowledge.

(2) Another source of inherited constraints on theories constructed to answer the traditional epistemological question come from long-standing formal criteria of argumentative and theoretical adequacy. These are mostly negative constraints against certain forms of reasoning which are fallacious or lead to unacceptable conclusions. For instance, premises cannot lead to conclusions that are contradictory or incoherent, and arguments used to justify a positive theory of knowledge cannot be circular or simply beg the question against the contrary view. Adherence to these criteria seems co-extensive with the tradition of western philosophical thought. We take them to be basic prerequisites for doing philosophy, since they shape, in the most basic sense, what is to count as rational, and therefore, appropriate argumentation. Reliance on these formal criteria is evident in Hume, for instance, when he rejects the rationality of induction from past to future experiences, primarily because we are unable to provide a non-circular bridge to justify such an inference. More notoriously, general agreement on a stricture against circular argumentation can be seen in the widespread agreement to dismiss Descartes' proposed solution to scepticism, since it clearly argues in a circle.³³ As well, both Stroud and Williams make numerous criticisms against the diagnostic efforts of Moore, Carnap, Kant, and others, on the grounds of begging the question against the force of scepticism.³⁴

(3) The final and perhaps most heterogeneous conditions stem from various epistemologist's intuition-driven criteria of intellectual satisfaction. These criteria have less to do with defining the specific aim of the traditional epistemological project or the formal aspects constraining what will be accepted as arguments, than with the intuitive sense of what will satisfy our urge to understand knowledge in a completely general way. These include mostly negative restrictions as well: anti-sceptical theories of knowledge should not appear obviously ad hoc, nor should we count as success any theory that claims to deliver knowledge but only in a restricted sense (that is, by re-defining and limiting what is meant by knowing). A successful theory also should not rule out most things we ordinarily claim to know, that is, should not seem to concede so much ground to scepticism that the "response" is hardly distinguishable from scepticism itself. Idealism and phenomenalism are common targets for this criticism. Moreover, a satisfactory solution should not appeal primarily to claiming that scepticism makes no sense, is meaningless, or that the question of traditional epistemology is obviously incoherent. "Solutions" which rely on such hasty dismissals fare badly against the intuition that we do understand the meaning of the sceptical challenge since we claim to understand precisely what is wrong with it, and how to overcome these defects. Appeals to all of these additional criteria are evident in both Stroud and Williams.³⁵

Particular intuition-driven requirements seem to be more idiosyncratic. Williams, for instance, claims that an adequacy condition on any satisfactory explanation will be that a theory of knowledge explains why scepticism seems so theoretically powerful but nevertheless ordinarily, completely unacceptable. He calls this the need for an adequate

theory to be able to explain the context-bound nature of both knowledge and scepticism. But this seems like a tailor-made requirement for his preferred diagnosis. Stroud, on the other hand, adds that it is not a satisfactory option to conclude that we are unable, qua human beings, to accomplish the traditional task without feeling as dissatisfied as we have been with each successive failure to secure a general account of the possibility of knowledge against sceptical challenges. This brings us once again to the fundamental issue of whether or not, and to what extent, epistemologists can justify revising what has become the accepted description of the traditional task of the epistemological project. *Can this be done only on pain of further dissatisfaction? Must the intended revisionary-minded epistemologist attempt to show that the current description fails to capture what traditionally has really been sought? Or can revision be justified by appeal to its desirable non-sceptical outcome? Whether revising or even abandoning the traditional aim of a completely general explanatory account of knowledge can ever count as satisfactory will require further exploration of how the above criteria of satisfaction are implemented and interpreted.*

Notice the inherent ambiguity in making any claim about philosophical “satisfaction.” Satisfaction is used to describe both (a) the fulfillment of specific theoretical conditions and methodological constraints, and (b) the overall sense that the resultant theory of knowledge gratifies the desire to understand something in a certain way. In the case of scepticism, this latter sense of satisfaction is supposed to follow from securing the possibility of knowledge against sceptical challenges without violating the conditions of (a). One might suppose that we should guard against conflating what I have

called the formal conditions of theoretical satisfaction, and what might be called intuition-driven conditions of intellectual satisfaction in trying to answer the traditional demand for a certain kind of account of knowledge. One way to attempt to keep them separate is to suggest that one or the other category operates as substantive constraints, while the other are more strictly “metaphilosophical” principles. That is, we might try to give one of the categories privileged status over the others. This could be done by saying that one kind of criteria needs further justification, or else that one kind of criteria is fundamental and unalterable, while others are more malleable and subject to change. The temptation is to think that categorizing the criteria this way, or in similar ways, will help us judge which conditions are to be valued and protected at the expense of which others. If something must be revised it should be, say, the conditions arising from our intuitions, or else those criteria of satisfaction that follow from the traditional project. It seems less likely that we would want to alter the formal conditions of argumentative and theoretical adequacy since these tend to appeal to general features of the accepted canon of argumentation and rationality at the very heart of the western philosophical tradition. But this might be to take far too seriously the classification of these criteria into different kinds as more than a convenient rubric. The suggestion that these two senses can or should be kept separate seems dubious. For the formal conditions can not be seen to exist apart from and independent of the less rigid considerations of what will be found intellectually satisfying.

If some metaphilosophical criteria are to be deemed more essential than others, since they are more credible, this will have to be argued for. At the very least, evidence

should be suggested to support the view that certain metaphilosophical principles are indispensable, if one wants to take such a view. I do not think anyone attempting such a program will succeed. The temptation is to see the formal conditions of satisfaction as more objective, and different in kind from the more “subjective” aspirations of particular epistemologists. But to close this small circle, we have only to recognize that the more formal constraints on our theories are tailor-made to suit what we are aspiring to solve or capture in the first place. We must recognize that both the formal and intuition-driven conditions of satisfaction are necessarily shaped by the direction and goal of our inquiry. All of these criteria can be seen as equally able to serve as privileged or alterable, since *they are all metaphilosophical, in the sense that they are themselves not argued for, but instead serve to shape the possibilities to be explored within a given style of inquiry.* To treat them otherwise is to assume that the formal conditions of satisfaction somehow exert control over our endeavours regardless of whether we choose to accept them. It is to see those requirements as somehow more deeply-rooted or objective than our adherence to say, other aspects of our tradition, or other deeply-rooted intuitions. Conversely, to view constraints on what we will find intellectually satisfying as somehow separable from the goal of our chosen inquiry is to invite the tacit acceptance of philosophy as constrained by forces beyond human choice and interest. I am suggesting that there is a *reciprocal relationship* between our aims and ends, between our metaphilosophical requirements and the results of our investigations, and most importantly, between our metaphilosophical principles and our level of satisfaction with our outcome. This itself is a substantive conception of the self-image of philosophical inquiry. *Pace* Stroud, I think

recognizing the metaphilosophical nature of the constraints that have continually led epistemologists to grief should allow us to describe our situation as one other than “inevitable dissatisfaction.” For in coming to see that our inherited conception of inquiry, specific methodological constraints, and deeply-felt intuitions, as well as the formal criteria of argumentative and theoretical satisfaction are *equally metaphilosophical*, we can draw the moral that we are indeed *as free to invent new kinds of inquiry and fashion alternate explanatory aspirations, as we are to cling to the traditional ones*. More dramatically, we are not only able to do so, but genuinely *forced* to do so. We will continue to fail to recognize this for as long as we treat formal or traditional, or even intuition-driven criteria of satisfaction as somehow beyond the scope of revision, on pain of inevitable dissatisfaction.

One way of looking at the paradox at the heart of the traditional epistemological project is to take it as an invitation to undertake something like a *reductio*. The argument form *reductio ad absurdum* proceeds by showing that from a given set of premises (or assumptions) a contradiction or paradox follows. This is significant in the sense of pointing to a problem with adopting the entire set of premises. For if the absurd conclusion follows from this given set of premises, one or more of the premises must be faulty. In the case of the sceptical outcome of our philosophical investigation into the possibility of knowledge, if we can define the conditions of satisfaction required to motivate the traditional inquiry, and show that they lead to the paradoxical conclusion that knowledge is not possible, then we may be led to reject one of those conditions. Stroud captures the point this way:

I would grant—indeed insist—that philosophical skepticism is not something we should seriously consider adopting or accepting [...] Taking the paradoxical reasonings seriously and re-examining the assumptions they rest on can be important and fruitful when there is no question at all of our ever contemplating adopting a “theory” or doctrine embodying the absurd conclusion.³⁶

In a more recent paper, he puts it this way:

Almost nobody thinks for a moment that skepticism could be correct. But that does not mean that it is not important. If skepticism really is the inevitable outcome of trying to understand human knowledge in a certain way, and we think it simply could not be correct, that should make us look much more critically at that way of trying to understand human knowledge in the first place.³⁷

The deeper problem arises when it is recognized that scepticism can be generated rather simply, and from only a few core epistemological concepts. It is not obvious that we can give up our traditional notion of, say, objectivity without the unwanted conclusion that scepticism indeed triumphs indirectly since we fail to secure the goal that we originally sought. We would be just as dissatisfied if we concluded that we are unable to provide an account of the kind demanded by traditional epistemological inquiry, as we are with the prospect that scepticism is the answer to the epistemological question. Or so Stroud would have it.

According to Stroud, there is a more immediate source of dissatisfaction to be found in the contemporary debate about scepticism. Williams agrees with Stroud’s identification of a

familiar pattern in the theory of knowledge. We find ourselves with questions about knowledge that lead either to an unsatisfactory sceptical conclusion or to this or that ‘theory’ of knowledge which on reflection turns out to offer no more genuine satisfaction than the original sceptical conclusion it was meant to avoid.³⁸

Williams refers to Stroud’s “familiar pattern” as “the epistemologist’s dilemma,” which he points out has two equally unsavoury horns. If we follow Hume and Stroud in

accepting the naturalness of philosophical scepticism, “we can either accept scepticism, or make changes to our pre-theoretical thinking about knowledge that shrink the domain, or alter the status, of what we previously thought of as knowledge of objective fact.”³⁹ Direct concession to scepticism is unsatisfactory for obvious reasons. He explains why “solutions” like idealism or phenomenalism land us on the other horn: “There is no satisfaction because, under pressure from scepticism, we end up seriously modifying our pre-theoretical conception of knowledge.”⁴⁰ So Stroud and Williams are agreed that not only is scepticism unsatisfactory as a theory of knowledge, but that we must avoid narrowing the domain of what we have always considered ourselves to know. Importantly, what counts as “our pre-theoretical conception of knowledge” for Williams, does not include any intuitions that can be shown to be reliant on underlying theoretical support. For instance, methodological constraints which derive their necessity from theoretical features of any inquiry undertaken, are open to exposure and, if need be, abandonment. This is the key point that will allow Williams to assert victory over the sceptical challenge, despite having to concede defeat on the traditional epistemological demand for a completely general assessment of the totality of our knowledge taken from a detached, objective point of view.

Stroud insists on a further qualification about satisfaction, which blocks what Williams’ seems to offer as our best hope of dodging the epistemologist’s dilemma. Encountering the disagreeable horns of the epistemologists dilemma, we may be tempted to work backwards from the paradoxical conclusion of scepticism to cast suspicion on the cogency of the project’s requirements and conditions. Stroud himself suggests that this

route is alluring, but he concludes that it is ultimately just another route to dissatisfaction. “The epistemological project,” Stroud reminds us, “feels like the pursuit of a perfectly comprehensible intellectual goal.”⁴¹ Extricating ourselves from the burden of the tradition may be the only way to block Stroud’s final wedge that pushes the contemporary epistemologist to walk one of three paths to dissatisfaction. Despite *prima facie* openness to the possibility of uncovering deeply-rooted mistakes in the traditional approach to epistemology, Stroud cannot ever see his way around modifying, let alone abandoning the criteria of satisfaction which I have called traditional, formal, and intuition-driven. Each of the numbered points below is a source of dissatisfaction that Stroud suggests pushes us toward the “pessimistic” conclusion that dissatisfaction is the only possible outcome of epistemological reflection:

- (1) Well-known strategies to block or overcome scepticism (Stroud considers Moore, Kant, Carnap, and Quine) either fail directly, or succeed to answer some other question. They never satisfy the philosophical demand for a completely general explanation of how our knowledge is possible. This often means that the theory advanced significantly restricts what we would ordinarily claim to know.
- (2) Based on an examination of the “platitudes we all accept” which generate scepticism, we face having to modify or reject intuitively-plausible epistemological concepts for which there are no independent grounds to discard, other than that they lead to scepticism.
- (3) If we conclude that the traditional epistemological goal is unattainable, it is not because we have succeeded in locating any incoherence or meaninglessness in the question itself. So, concluding that we are unable to supply the completely general justificatory account of how our knowledge is possible cannot possibly count as a satisfactory way to put the traditional question to rest either. Recognizing the gap between our aspirations and our achievements will lead to inevitable dissatisfaction.

If this is an accurate portrayal of our situation as theorists of knowledge, we will find it hard to resist Stroud’s conclusion that we are bound to be perpetually dissatisfied by

traditional epistemological inquiry. I will grant that (1) is an accurate description of traditional epistemological inquiry until now. Below I will argue that there are reasons to be suspicious of (2), and strong reasons to reject (3). I also think that Williams argues for a similar strategy. He labours under (1), which he formulates as the epistemologist's dilemma, but thinks that (3) will not bind us, if we can show that (2) misleadingly assumes that the only way to deny the cogency of the traditional project is to reject one or more core epistemological ideals.

If we accept Stroud's additional stricture (3) against counting as a source of satisfaction the discovery that the original aspiration of epistemological project was misguided, then our final word on epistemology will indeed be disappointment. But is this high degree of fidelity to the traditional epistemological project forced on us, or warranted for any reason? For Hume, recall, suggests that once we realize a goal is unattainable, we can and should detach from it, and gain the secondary satisfaction of having at least figured out the futility of the enterprise. Contemporarily, Thomas Nagel would like to follow Hume in this regard.⁴² Of course it is a matter of psychological fact, Hume added, that sometimes in the process of an investigation one becomes as attached to the intended goal as to the more general goal of carrying out an open and accurate investigation. In the case of the traditional epistemological project, this would mean to become more attached to securing a positive non-sceptical conclusion than to conducting an unbiased investigation into the *possibility* of knowledge. I think this is the case with Stroud, who makes it clear in the passage quoted above and elsewhere, that we cannot and should not accept scepticism as the final verdict. Either we secure a positive

epistemology or suffer inevitable dissatisfaction. Furthermore, discovering that we are “constitutionally unable to arrive at an answer to a perfectly comprehensible question is not satisfactory either.”⁴³ But as I will argue below, I do not think Stroud is warranted in moving from the disappointment of *a traditional goal* within epistemology, to the global pronouncement of inevitable dissatisfaction as the result of epistemology. This will point the way toward proposing and accepting an alternate description of how we should feel in wake of the (self-)destruction of the traditional epistemological project (Chapter 4.5). There it will become my focus to explore what options are available for moving past the long-standing epistemological concern with scepticism.

The weight of tradition is indeed powerful. However, coming to any sort of resolution on the matter of what relation holds between scepticism and epistemology will require determining what degree of deference and fidelity is owed the tradition. This will involve issues concerning how much freedom we can assert in modifying both our formal criteria of satisfaction and our aspirations about what sort of account should be deemed appropriately above our threshold of satisfaction. But since it is unlikely that we will find consensus on these conditions of satisfaction (especially the intuition-driven ones but also the formal and traditional criteria) it is possible that we will have to conclude that *there simply is not a single account of the relation between scepticism and the quest for knowledge since various epistemologists are adhering to different criteria of satisfaction*. But the recognition of this possibility itself cuts right to the core of what philosophy has seemed to always aspire to—a single, true, objective account that could be accepted by

anyone rational enough to comprehend the question being posed. J.C.C. Smart captures the point this way:

One trouble with philosophy is that philosophers are willing to question everything, not only the premises of their arguments but the very canons of right reasoning and the methodology of argument. If this is not a recipe for circularity of argument and irresolvable dispute, what is?⁴⁴

We must be able to leave open the possibility of extricating the particular demands of our epistemological tradition from those which may be seen to hold as a prerequisite to undertaking *any* investigation into human knowledge. However, proposing alternate criteria of satisfaction (whether formal or intuitive) is bound to lead to intractable disagreements stemming from different views of how much deference is owed to what we consider our traditional criteria of satisfaction. For how is one to motivate a proposal to modify or abandon a traditional stricture of theory construction? To say that the alteration is motivated simply by the desire to avoid the sceptical conclusion seems to invite charges of begging-the-question, being merely ad hoc, or else amounting to a tacit way of conceding the triumph of scepticism. The fear of being charged with round-about concession stems from not being able to respond that we do have knowledge in the same sense of the concept that scepticism challenges. The possibility of motivating a revision of key epistemological concepts and criteria of satisfaction may lie in coming to view the traditional account as suffering from the exact same shortcomings as possible alternatives. The difficult thing will be to recognize the contingency of traditional criteria of satisfaction that have served to shepherd generations of philosophers into the same sceptical problems. More generally, this raises the question once again about how loyal philosophers ought to be to the tradition they inherit, including the accompanying

problem set. The common aim, it seems, is to overcome or move past the problematic of scepticism, but to do so in a way that does not deny or shortchange the relevance and force of the sceptical challenge.

3.3 A Theoretical Diagnosis: Epistemological Realism and the Contextualist Alternative

Michael Williams is impressed enough by the force of the sceptical challenge to relinquish all hopes of providing “a definitive refutation.” We are not going to be able to block global scepticism if we take for granted the view of inquiry relied on to generate scepticism (specifically the relation between philosophical and everyday knowledge attributions). The task, then, is to examine carefully the features of the sceptical challenge that make it appear forced on us by “obvious truths” or “platitudes we all accept” (Stroud’s phrases) about our epistemic situation. According to Williams, even this way of putting the non-sceptical epistemologist’s task shifts the advantage toward the scepticism-friendly view of inquiry he wants to expose as theoretically-loaded (and therefore not natural). The above description concedes that there is something captured by the phrase “our epistemic situation.” It is Williams’ further burden to show how even the basic idea that we are trying to assess *something* that can be captured by the phrase “our epistemic situation” or “our knowledge of the external world” is not theoretically-innocent. More specifically, he wants to call attention to our assumption that we can uncover what “our epistemic situation” is like *apart from* the contexts of everyday life or particular forms of inquiry. His “contextualism” maintains that after abstracting away the particulars stemming from methodological necessities, disciplinary requirements, etc. there is, strictly speaking, *nothing left to assess*. I will outline below how Williams’

account allows him to enter the sceptical-sounding claim that “there is no such thing as knowledge of the world,” but to do so in a proposed, non-sceptical sense. In fact, Williams contends that it is only by denying that “our knowledge of the external world” captures a coherent theoretical kind or class of beliefs, that we can block the sceptical conclusion that we have no knowledge of the external world.

Williams considers two ways that sceptical arguments can be dealt with indirectly. The first, “therapeutic diagnosis,” aims to “dissolve” sceptical arguments by showing that they are “defective in point of meaning.” He rejects this type, for the same reason that he thinks we can never get away with accusing the sceptic of not making sense: “[W]e do understand him—well enough at least to appreciate why certain anti-sceptical strategies are doomed to fail [...]”⁴⁵ The other indirect alternative—his favoured approach—is “theoretical diagnosis,” the burden of which “is to show that sceptical arguments derive their force, not from commonsensical intuitions about knowledge, but from theoretical ideas that we are by no means bound to accept.”⁴⁶ Notice that this will require the acceptance of two separable claims: (a) that scepticism does not necessarily follow naturally from our “commonsensical intuitions,” or what he calls elsewhere, our “pre-theoretical thinking about knowledge,” but also, (b) that these theoretical ideas are in some sense optional, that is, not forced upon us. For it is not obvious, as Williams seems to suggest, that (b) directly follows from (a). It is conceivable that we may trace the basis of scepticism to a theoretical notion, or a number of theoretical notions that we are nonetheless not free to revise or abandon. To show that we can do without these “contentious theoretical doctrines” would require showing how we

can retain what we want to keep in the epistemological project (traditionally, to explain the general question of how all of our knowledge of the world is possible without denying objectivity, etc.), without appeal to this purportedly “gratuitous” theoretical assumption. In this way, it becomes less important whether Williams can trace the basis of scepticism to the theoretical idea of “epistemological realism,” (the burden of (a)), than it is that he be able to show how we can proceed without this theory in place (the burden of (b)). It is Williams’ failure to support this further claim that ultimately robs his diagnosis of the significance he wishes it could have.

Williams thinks we can learn from Thompson Clarke’s question, which he often quotes with approval: “What is the sceptic examining: our most fundamental convictions, or the product of a large piece of philosophizing about empirical knowledge done before he comes on stage?”⁴⁷ Stroud seems to side with the first option, but Williams must prove the second. This is not an easy task, for as Williams recognizes, “[o]n the surface, sceptical arguments *appear* simple and intuitive, far simpler and far more intuitive than the arcane theories [...] that are invoked to refute them.”⁴⁸ But this is exactly why he thinks “theoretical diagnosis” is our best and only hope for showing that the sceptical argument, while coherent and intelligible *in a certain context*, is dependent implicitly on theoretical commitments that usually remain hidden, “*unnoticed, denied or felt to be unavoidable (perhaps, as constituting the sheerest common sense).*”⁴⁹ He suggests that a clear understanding of the theoretical commitments underlying traditional epistemology will help in two ways. First, it will reveal “how [theoretically loaded concepts] enforce a certain sense of what the philosophical possibilities are.” And second, it will help “to

shatter their aura of inevitability.”⁵⁰ This is obviously what must be done if Stroud is to be shaken from his insistence that scepticism, and our subsequent epistemological dissatisfaction, rests merely on tracing the consequences of “obvious truths” and “platitudes we all accept.”

This is what Williams purports to have done by uncovering the pervasive commitment to “epistemological realism” at work in what Stroud calls “the traditional epistemological project.” The idea that “epistemological realism” attempts to capture is not what we might commonly think of as metaphysical realism, that is, some combination of a correspondence theory of truth with the belief that we have direct access to the objective world. Rather, it is better to think of what is meant here as realism about epistemological kinds and their organization. Williams makes this distinction clearly when he writes: “This is not, I must stress, realism with respect to what we claim to know, but *realism with respect to the objects of epistemological inquiry*.”⁵¹ Elsewhere he describes epistemological realism as “a form of extreme realism about epistemological constraints and relations”⁵² or more specifically, any account that “suppose[es] that there are objective epistemological relations underlying the shifting contexts and standards of everyday justification.” But in order to make that supposition, one already has to consider “‘our knowledge of the world’ as a genuine totality” or as “a possible object of wholesale assessment.”⁵³ This can only be supported by the unfounded and unnecessary assumption that “every belief has an inalienable epistemic character,”⁵⁴ which is determined by its content (as opposed to its context) into a natural hierarchy of classes of privileged and problematic beliefs.

It is this ubiquitous assumption, Williams contends, that leads us to a host of intermediary assumptions, including that knowledge is in need of grounding, and must find its foundations in an integrated class of beliefs. Since perceptual beliefs are likely candidates here, it seems natural and inevitable to lead toward scepticism. Foundationalism as a theory of justification is one of these troublesome theories that gain support from the assumption of epistemological realism. Another is known as “the epistemic priority of sensory experience to knowledge of the world.” This stems from the basic point, stressed by Hume and other empiricists, that the primary source of beliefs is sensory experience. This seemingly innocuous point, common to empiricism and science, will be seen to generate scepticism in a swift and simple manner. In short, the status of sensory experience as primary shades effortlessly into claims of its privilege and priority. That is, epistemic priority at once classifies beliefs into different kinds, while exposing (or perhaps cleaving) a gap that must be bridged (if it can be) by some sort of inference.

Recall the purpose of thought experiments that invoke the possibility of a deceptive evil demon or mad scientist. In *Significance*, Stroud generates scepticism with the help of the dream-possibility raised in Descartes’ First Meditation. This, briefly, is the consideration put forth by Descartes that in order to know anything I must be able to discount the possibility that this apparent experience is not merely a dream-state. To use Descartes’ example, say that I am sitting in front of the fire, holding a piece of paper in my hand. If I was lying in bed merely dreaming this state of affairs, I could not be said to know that I was sitting by the fire, etc. This seems uncontested because what you would be claiming would be false. It isn’t the case that since you are dreaming, you must not be

sitting by the fire. For you could be asleep in your chair, etc. The point is to show that your current experience is not necessarily a reliable guide to the world around you. Descartes' insidious probe asks, 'To what, if anything, can I point to validate my claim to know that I am not currently dreaming what I seem to be experiencing?' Stroud thinks the reasoning that leads to this constraint is "immediately gripping,"⁵⁵ and marks a point of resistance that must be upheld, if scepticism is to be blocked. If we are dreaming, we cannot be said to know. But do we also have to know that we are not now dreaming as a condition that must be fulfilled if we are to provide a satisfactory positive account of how our knowledge of an external world is possible? If so, scepticism seems to follow almost immediately. But without deciding this issue, we are still made to recognize that what we take to be sensory experience is at least logically independent of how the external world may be. By allowing the possibility that one's sensory experience is the result of brain stimulation in a laboratory, we can come to see that our experience could be just as it is, without counting as evidence for our assumption or inference to an independent world of existing objects.

Even more simply, the recognition of this gap between experience and the external world (or more traditionally, appearance and reality) can be generated without the apparatus of potential super-villain, or even the possibility of mistaking dreaming for waking experience. Williams remarks that it is an "uncontroversial fact that, without functioning sense organs, it would be difficult or impossible to learn anything about one's surroundings [...]"⁵⁶ Indeed, Hume begins (and without argument) from the claim that experience is the source of all knowledge. Stroud puts our situation this way:

Our knowledge is [...] confined to our sensory experiences. There seems to be no way of going beyond them to know that the world around us really is this way rather than that. [...] But if we acknowledge that our sensory experiences are all we ever have to go on in gaining knowledge about the world, and we acknowledge, as we must, that given our experiences as they are we could nevertheless be simply dreaming of sitting by the fire, we must concede that we do not know that we are sitting by the fire [...]. Our sensory experience gives us no basis for believing one thing about the world around us rather than its opposite, *but our sensory experience is all we have got to go on.*⁵⁷

Such considerations do seem to open up at least a logical gap between our experiences and what may or may not be the case in a world apart from our conscious awareness. Williams contends that considering this “logical gap” between experience and a non-experienced reality gives rise to “an almost irresistible temptation” to think that scepticism might follow from this alone. However, Williams argues that additional theoretical commitments are necessary to go from what he acknowledges is the “neutrality of experience” to the more robust claim that sensory experience stands in a relation of “epistemic priority” over knowledge of the external world.

Williams’ burden is to show that we cannot move from the seeming truisms that (a) experience is neutral with regard to how things really are, and (b) “possessing functioning sense-organs is a causal precondition for possessing knowledge” to the claim that sense experience is epistemically prior to knowledge of the external world. Otherwise, according to Williams, we are guilty of mistaking a claim about experience as a cause of belief, for the more contentious claim that sensory experience must serve as the ultimate ground for beliefs about the external world. The logical gap between experience and a mind-independent world does not *entail* the further assumption of a fixed “epistemological asymmetry” which requires sensory experience to count as

evidence for beliefs about an objective world.⁵⁸ No epistemological moral is forced on us by this merely conceptual point. The move toward scepticism only seems natural, and is only made possible, by surreptitiously importing foundationalist ideas about knowledge and justification. If we reject these foundationalist presuppositions, we are free to deny the sceptical moral. Or so Williams' argument contends.

This is an example of Williams' aim to overturn the rhetorical advantage derived from "the apparent simplicity and brevity of sceptical arguments."⁵⁹ By exposing the theoretical assumption common to these concepts ("epistemological realism"), Williams hopes to show that sceptical doubts are not natural (where natural here is opposed to theoretical). He wants to make the further claim that by being theoretical they are therefore optional. By viewing them as more natural than they are, Williams contends that we are mistakenly led to the view, common to Hume and Stroud, that scepticism falls out of the very attempt to reflect philosophically on what qualifies any belief to count as knowledge.

In these abstract terms, it may not be clear what Williams is hoping to achieve by illuminating this theoretical assumption. Both Stroud and Williams agree that once a gap is acknowledged between our experiential knowledge of the world, on the one side, and our knowledge of the mind-independent external world of objects, on the other, the prospect of blocking scepticism is slight. Both refer to this as the traditional assumption of the "epistemic priority of experiential knowledge over knowledge of the external world." They also agree that anything like idealism or phenomenalism that attempt to satisfy us with appearances, but leave the standing possibility of a reality beyond our

reach, will not do. The difference between Stroud and Williams is that Stroud cannot see his way to deny this basic consideration, while Williams contends that, by dropping epistemological realism (which underwrites everything from foundationalism to epistemic priority), we will not even be able to make sense of what we assume is an intuitive contrast. What Williams tries to challenge is the notion that this logical possibility of a gap forces on us the sense that we are forever trapped on one side of the divide (whether it be described as the subjective side, the appearance side, or the merely experiential side). Williams wants to challenge our assumption that there is anything coherently captured by the idea that there is something to contrast with these terms. This “something,” according to Williams, goes by the innocuous label, “knowledge of the external world,” and is assumed, by Stroud and others, to stand as a context-invariant, standing ideal which we are doomed to fail to meet.

What Williams wants to deny is that “knowledge of the external world” can be a term of contrast to our experiential knowledge, since it is not a kind (as in ‘natural kind’) of knowledge at all. Stroud always emphasizes the point that we cannot just abandon what we have always seemed to want from a theory of knowledge, or the criteria by which we have traditionally judged satisfactoriness, because it seems perfectly well like an intelligible pursuit. But Williams’ alleged uncovering of the implicit “epistemological realism” at work in traditional epistemology offers an explanation of the connection between the two:

The reason is obvious enough: we expect general intelligibility only with respect to kinds that exhibit some kind of theoretical integrity: paradigmatically, the kinds we call ‘natural kinds.’ To the extent that the traditional quest for a general understanding of our knowledge of the world does feel like the pursuit of a

perfectly intelligible goal, it must be because we are willing to attribute some kind of theoretical integrity to the beliefs in question.⁶⁰

In other words, by rejecting “epistemological realism,” Williams wants to deny that the object of the traditional epistemological quest is a coherent object of study at all. Think for instance of the peculiar, and undoubtedly problematic, way that epistemic priority is formulated: “It is agreed on all sides, for example, that if human beings know things about the world around them, they know them somehow on the basis of what they perceive by means of the senses.”⁶¹ From this consideration, it seems natural to formulate the problem as understanding the relationship between sensory experience and “knowledge of the external world,” as trying to derive the later from the former. But can we even make sense of this phrase “knowledge of the external world” aside from the concrete examples and contexts of a particular inquiry? Williams thinks the idea that there is something that can be captured by that phrase only makes sense if we import the theoretically loaded epistemological realist constraints which go beyond what he has agreed to by accepting what I have called the traditional, formal, and intuition-driven criteria of satisfaction. His criticism of foundationalism, insofar as it is related to epistemological realism, is captured in the supposed relation (according to epistemological realists) between a belief’s *content* and its *fixed status* in the hierarchy of epistemological kinds—which is another way of saying that the idea of epistemic priority is at the heart of scepticism:

The crucial point about foundationalism is that it involves more than openness to the idea of an epistemological hierarchy, cutting across ordinary subject-matter divisions: it involves a certain conception of the *status* of this hierarchy. This hierarchy is thought to capture the fundamental, underlying structure of all empirical justification and is conceived by the foundationalist as *fully objective*.⁶²

Importantly, Williams cannot avoid at least formal elements of foundationalism in providing a theory of justification. What matters for him, is that contextualism does not commit him to a substantive foundationalism—an example of which would be the standard empiricist assumption that a particular class of beliefs (our knowledge of the external world) is inferentially dependent on another (our sensory experience). Contextualism, to be successful, must both serve our regular epistemic purposes and avoid this commitment to “think[ing] of ourselves as having an ‘epistemic position’ that is fundamentally unchangeable.”⁶³ If we did have a single, maximal epistemic position it would make sense to see ordinary knowledge as somehow secondary to this better epistemic position; but in seeing the traditional epistemological project as *just one more context* (with its attendant methodological constraints and matrix of assumptions and accepted requirements for justification), we can cease to see our failure to satisfy the aspirations of the traditional project as tainting the results of other knowledge we gain in other contexts of inquiry, since we will cease to feel deprived of a privileged, ultimate “way of knowing” that we can never have.

To better understand why he thinks contextualism will succeed, where the assumption of epistemological realism will always fail, it will be helpful to compare this view to his own proposed alternative. Williams uses the label “contextualism,” to describe his favoured alternative conception of justification and knowledge, which he regards as the only “antidote to foundationalism” and its attendant ills.⁶⁴ The questions to be explored now are: Is Williams able to offer a genuine alternative to epistemological realism? And, if so, is such an alternative feasible? According to Williams,

epistemological realism is the root, of which foundationalism and scepticism are the tangled branches. Contextualism, on the other hand, is often presented as the negation of epistemological realism, with the purported upside, that such a view of justification can avoid both foundationalist assumptions and scepticism. Epistemological realists see requirements for justification as autonomous, context-invariant, and fully objective features of our epistemic situation. A contextualist, on the other hand, sees the requirements for justification arising from situational, world-dependent features of each particular inquiry, which are always relative to the interests and goal at hand.⁶⁵ Consider a number of related claims Williams makes on behalf of his alternative theory of justification as it contrasts with the epistemic realism implicit in foundationalism:

Rejecting epistemological realism, I see constraints on knowledge and justification as subject to contextual variation: whether I count as knowing something or other depends on the kind of investigation or discipline my putative knowledge belongs to, my worldly circumstances, and so on.⁶⁶

[...] it makes justification depend on a context of background beliefs and even on situational factors that are entirely extra-doxastic.⁶⁷

Unfortunately, Williams never specifies what might count as relevant “extra-doxastic” “situational factors” or how this would shape our demand for justification in any particular case. Williams’ stated intention to “demystify justification in part by locating it in the world of human practices,”⁶⁸ sounds like a promising strategy, but remains radically underdeveloped. But his point is this: We have tended to view epistemology as a kind of pure inquiry—the purest imaginable—since it supposedly allows us to seek full justification in a way that practical constraints usually do not permit. This view imports at least two assumptions, both of which are highly questionable: (1) that traditional

epistemological inquiry is somehow the only form of inquiry which is free of methodological constraints, and (2) that the results of inquiry in one context (epistemological inquiry) can be taken as the yardstick by which to pronounce a final verdict on the totality of “our knowledge of the external world.” He puts it this way: “foundationalist standards do not reflect ineluctable facts; they are inescapable only in that they are a methodological necessity of the traditional project of assessing the totality of our knowledge of the world.”⁶⁹

If we accept that no possible context of inquiry is theoretically-innocent (which is perhaps even more than Williams can hope to argue for), where does this put us with regard to the relation between the traditional epistemological project and scepticism? Williams is not shy about promoting the alleged upside of the move away from epistemological realism, toward the direction of contextualizing knowledge and justification: “[...] I see my sketch of a contextualist alternative to epistemological realism as offering a certain redrawing of the standard map of our conceptual terrain.”⁷⁰ Williams suggests that his aim is to discredit the notion that a question like the traditional goal of providing a general account of the totality of our knowledge can be coherently asked, so he seems neither to concede global scepticism nor preserve only a modified or narrowed sense of what we can ordinarily know. So he is not in violation of the epistemologist’s dilemma. But can he defend himself against the further condition of satisfaction proposed by Stroud, namely that a successful theory must not modify the core concepts, aim, and requirements of traditional epistemology on pain of similar dissatisfaction? Williams does not think he has to sacrifice any particular concept or

intuition like objectivity, but he does have to call into question the assumption that the results of epistemological inquiry can or should be taken to be the ultimate answer to the general question: “How is all of our knowledge possible?” Finally, we can ask how Williams might respond to Stroud’s furthest-reaching probe, the one which suggests that pointing out the impossibility of obtaining a general understanding of the kind traditional epistemology seeks dooms us to dissatisfaction just the same as the more direct failures.

Exploring this connection will introduce the wider question of Stroud and Williams’ respective relation to the internalism/externalism debate in epistemology. This will be taken up in Chapter 4. Consider Williams’ following claim about contextualism:

Contextualism, with its implied externalism, is not offered as a question-begging direct answer to an *undeniably compelling request for understanding*, but as a challenge to justify the presumption that there is something to understand.”⁷¹

His strategy is to bypass having to give a direct answer to that traditional question. Recall that both Stroud and Williams oppose hasty dismissals of the force and value of the sceptical challenge. However, in the end, Williams can only seem to offer a longer, and more sophisticated reason for dismissing the sceptical challenge. This is why I want to stress that whatever Williams can achieve by exposing epistemological realism, and replacing it with contextualism, he cannot make any progress on the question that Stroud presses. As such, Williams gets no closer to providing an account that is satisfactory (in Stroud’s admittedly strict sense) than any previous account. Before moving on in the next section to examine the externalist movement in contemporary epistemology, I want to suggest what I think is the most Williams can claim to have shown at this point.

Recall that Williams' thematic aim is to counter the current Hume-inspired pessimism with regard to epistemology by exposing the theoretical baggage of the sceptical challenge. Showing that scepticism is not a natural or intuitive problem is supposed to redistribute the burden of theory, and resist the popular, broadly naturalistic responses to scepticism. These approaches suggest that what we ordinarily call knowledge will never amount to knowledge in the full sense of satisfying our most robust philosophical standards for rational justification, but that we can, do, and must get by with "less." Williams tries to show that there is no stable context captured by the phrase "our epistemic situation" with regard to some integrated set of beliefs that can be captured in the phrase "our knowledge of the external world." Fair enough. But has Williams shown that *in the context created by epistemic inquiry (including the methodological constraints and the various criteria of satisfaction)* scepticism is not the final word? He has not, and his muted recognition of this fact can be teased out of statements like:

The only context in which I have any reason to take seriously the possibility that I am a brain in a vat is that provided by the traditional epistemological project. [...] But I have never denied that the sceptic is conditionally correct, in the sense that, by the standards he insists on applying, we never know anything about the world. My point has always been that these standards are something we apply. They are not built into the human condition but into a particular intellectual project, itself far from theory free, and standards that are brought into play by a particular project have no claim on us outside of it.⁷²

This is hardly the radical break with tradition that Williams has been promising. In fact, the upside of his contextualization of knowledge leaves untouched the failure of the traditional project to provide a legitimating or justificatory account of how we could ever arrive at the type of understanding that we have been seeking. By conceding that

scepticism reigns within (even if *only* within) the context of traditional epistemology, he has failed to provide an *alternative* that saves the traditional project. The conditional correctness of scepticism still stands as an unaddressed threat to philosophical theories of knowledge. On a contextualist theory of justification, the sceptic will never be able to grab hold of a global epistemological theoretical entity to call into question. However, in the end, even if Williams succeeds in convincing us of contextualism, he fails to provide a way around scepticism that is not in some sense concessive—a goal that he elsewhere claims to honour. For he still fails to answer the traditional demand to explain how all knowledge is possible in general.⁷³

Unlike Hume, who continued to champion the value of philosophical justification as the ultimate arbiter to which ordinary knowledge could never match up, Williams shows us why we need not worry about the *spread* of epistemological scepticism into other inquiries—since such a move would violate the contextual nature of knowledge. The demands of each context, he tells us, are not transferable. But was that ever really the concern of Hume or Stroud? For Hume, Nature compels us to believe, whenever we are not sustaining philosophical reflection. For Stroud, scepticism is too outrageous to ever be accepted outside of philosophy; however, that does not denigrate, even granting the “‘distinctly philosophical’ character of the traditional investigation,”⁷⁴ the interest and import of the problem. No one is denying that philosophical scepticism is not a worthwhile position to assert outside of epistemological inquiry. Despite the merits of Williams’ theoretical diagnosis, he may have only provided another case for a conclusion everyone already accepts: philosophical scepticism must remain insulated from other

inquiries. Whether we suppose this containment is justified on practical grounds, naturalistic ones, or by stressing the contextual nature of all claims to know, we are left with the Humean disassociation between the impossibility of philosophically justified belief, and the indispensability of trusting our everyday beliefs. Insulation has been a mark of most sceptical accounts for centuries; perhaps Williams' achievement is to have provided a means to isolate scepticism that is not overtly naturalistic or pragmatic.

So Williams concludes that scepticism is not a global threat, but in so doing, he moves no closer to showing that the kind of justification traditional epistemology seeks is possible. This does not seem like a decisive victory, in traditional terms, if it should be counted as a non-sceptical philosophical position at all. While Williams is not technically in violation of what he calls the "epistemologist's dilemma," he does violate Stroud's stricture against counting as satisfactory any account that rests on showing "how and why the epistemological enterprise is not fully valid, or perhaps not even fully coherent." Stroud thinks such a 'solution' "would show, at best, that we cannot have any such thing [as the traditional project aspires to]." He adds, quite plausibly: "[...] that too, I believe, would leave us unsatisfied."⁷⁵

3.4 Is Satisfaction Possible?

We have seen that Stroud's investigation into the sources of scepticism in the traditional epistemological project has left him perpetually frustrated. In *Significance*, Stroud frames our situation most direly in this dilemma: "Accepting [the sceptical conclusion] and holding to it consistently seems disastrous, and yet rejecting it seems impossible."⁷⁶ Elsewhere he has written of "the hopeless plight [...] the old conception

leaves us in,” but also of the futility of merely changing the subject, or the dissatisfaction that concluding there is something fatally flawed in the epistemological enterprise brings.⁷⁷ Perhaps what strikes Williams as Stroud’s most pessimistic claim is the additional claim that any diagnosis that could pinpoint how the traditional aim is misguided would still fail to satisfy, since it would leave untouched our original urge for a philosophical understanding. This is why Williams presents the upside of his contextualist position as denying that we have any “epistemic position” from which to fail to gain the kind of general understanding that Stroud (and traditional epistemologists) crave. “It follows,” Williams tells us, “that lacking a fixed epistemic position is not to be equated with being in an unsatisfactory epistemic position.” But is this really more than sleight of hand on Williams’ part? Has he showed us, as he suggests he does, how not to be pessimistic about the prospects of epistemology?

I think not. Traditional epistemology is as hopeless on Williams account as it is on the otherwise heterogeneous accounts of Stroud, Sosa, or Quine. None of them come close to fulfilling what they all agree is the traditional aspiration of epistemology. Williams can only hope to convince us that the unpalatable doctrine of the priority of experience of sensory experience over knowledge of the external world is “only a methodological necessity of traditional epistemological inquiry.” Even if we accept this, and the contextualist point that “there [are] no constraints on knowledge of the world as such,”⁷⁸ we have done nothing to vindicate the self-image of philosophical theories of knowledge as privileged accounts of our best position with regard to knowing. Stroud never really presses the promising suggestions put forth in the introduction to

Significance where he proposes to use the case study of scepticism “to bring into question our very understanding of what a philosophical theory of knowledge is supposed to be.” More pointedly, he adds: “It is time to stop and ask what *any* philosophical theory of knowledge is supposed to do.”⁷⁹ These fundamental probes get diluted however as a result of his continued attachment to the traditional conception of a philosophical theory as having to adhere to what I have outlined above as the various criteria of satisfaction. He feels pressure to meet those criteria in order to claim intellectual satisfaction at all. Williams’ final position is not that the sceptic fails to make his or case, only that the sceptical challenge only makes sense within a peculiar context; scepticism may triumph under the particular criteria of satisfaction outlined above, but that success is necessarily limited to this peculiar context of epistemological inquiry. Any given set of criteria of satisfaction are tied to a particular context of inquiry, and cannot be transferred into other contexts without following Hume in what Williams considers Hume’s fundamental fallacy: “[H]e takes the discovery, that in the study, knowledge of the world is impossible for the discovery, in the study, that knowledge is impossible generally.”⁸⁰ I think this makes clear that Williams success, although it cannot even be called success in traditional terms (that is, with reference to traditional criteria of satisfaction), is partial at best.

Williams insists that tracing the triumph of scepticism on the traditional account to epistemological realism, shows “that scepticism is not the final truth about ‘our epistemic situation’ that epistemological pessimists take it to be.”⁸¹ However, this is fully compatible with Stroud’s claim that scepticism seems like the only possible outcome of trying to satisfy our traditional epistemological aspirations. Neither Stroud’s nor Hume’s

position depends on scepticism counting as “the final truth.” In fact, neither think that we could ever accept scepticism as “the final truth,” even if we were completely rationally satisfied that this was the case. For Hume, this should motivate us to explore in naturalistic terms how we do secure these non-philosophically supported beliefs. For Stroud, this should lead us to call into question why most epistemologists “continue to acquiesce in the traditional problem and do not acknowledge that there is no satisfactory solution.”⁸² Both Stroud and Hume have a lot to say about what counts as knowledge in non-philosophically reflective contexts, and although they both may occasionally despair over our failure to rationally secure our belief in, say, knowledge of an external world, neither contends that this failure cannot be isolated within the peculiar realm of epistemology. If the value of Williams’s reminder about the context-bound nature of all knowledge is to serve as a corrective at all, it may be in compelling modesty about the value of any philosophical “theory” of knowledge. But does this result really bolster Williams’ thematic aim to counter the recent wave of “pessimism” within epistemology? It seems, rather, that his theoretical diagnosis just gives us another way of dismissing the aspiration of a completely general account of how our knowledge is possible. Still, we face Stroud’s suggestion that we will continue to feel dissatisfied with these modified epistemologies (whether externalist or naturalistic), because they take off from the recognition of the failure of traditional epistemology. Such positions force us to accept theories of knowledge that, like Quine’s naturalism or Sosa’s reliabilism, admit their fundamental circularity. But if we are deeply dissatisfied by dropping the criteria of satisfaction derived from the traditional epistemological project, how likely is it that we

can gain intellectual satisfaction by dropping such a basic criterion of argumentative adequacy as the stricture against circularity? This will be addressed further in Chapter 4.

There may be another aspect of Williams' view that helps combat Stroud's insistent dissatisfaction. We may take Williams' moral as pointing out not only the theory-laddeness, but also the contingency of, all criteria of satisfaction that epistemologists inherit. In other words, Williams can be seen to help remind epistemologists like Stroud that there is a major difference between an aspiration that has deep roots in our tradition, versus the more drastic Humean sounding claim that approaching philosophical reflection in a certain way is tied to something deep in human nature. I think the source of Stroud's confusion, and his subsequent refusal to entertain the possibility of finding satisfaction in a non-traditional epistemology, lay in a perpetual conflation, evidenced by the following passage:

I think that whatever we seek in philosophy, or whatever leads us to ask philosophical questions at all, *must* be something pretty deep in human nature, and that what leads us to ask just the questions we do in the particular ways we now ask them must be something pretty deep in our tradition.⁸³

My general complaint is that Stroud does not adequately appreciate the difference between our nature and our tradition. Moreover, I wonder about the unaccounted for source of necessity in his use of "must" when referring to the source of our desire to answer certain general questions about human knowledge. Just because we inherit a tradition which has come to view certain formulations of general questions as characteristic of a philosophical interest in knowledge, nothing seems to warrant Stroud's further suggestion that we cannot abandon these questions, since they "must" stem from "something deep in human nature." Why can we not or should we not take a step back

from the traditional aspiration (and the recognition of the undesirable scepticism implicit in the traditional project of epistemology) and come to view it as a contingent project that was tried, shown to be unworkable, and therefore abandoned? Stroud's insistence that discovering we might be "constitutionally unable to arrive at an answer to a perfectly intelligible question is not satisfactory either"⁸⁴ seems like nothing more than a condition of satisfaction no more established than the traditional or formal criteria, which other epistemologists have seen fit to revise or abandon. This may be the ultimate value of Williams' attempt to show that *the epistemological context is just another context*, so to speak. It may shake someone like Stroud from tenaciously holding on to the criteria of satisfaction inherited from the traditional project as if these criteria arose not only from the requirements of a particular project, but rather, as if they arose naturally from a deeper source within the human condition itself. Further examples of Stroud conflating the investigation of the roots of the sceptical challenge in our philosophical tradition with talk of its roots in human nature are plentiful:

I think reflection on [epistemological] reflection can be expected to reveal something interesting and deep about human beings, or human aspiration.⁸⁵

Sceptical accounts like Descartes' dream-possibility argument are found "immediately gripping." Furthermore, "[I]t appeals to something deep in our nature and seems to raise a real problem about the human condition."⁸⁶

Why should we assume that the aspiration of a particular intellectual project will reveal anything beyond the criteria of satisfaction constitutive of that project? Why should we automatically assimilate the aspiration of the epistemological project with "something deep in our nature"? I think it is Stroud's failure to distinguish these senses in which we can consider the entrenchment of scepticism within our attempts to philosophically

reflect about knowledge that leads to his seemingly undefended assumption that we could never revise or abandon the traditional project even after finding it faulty. *He confuses the intimate relationship between scepticism and traditional epistemology for an intimate relationship between traditional epistemology and human nature.*

There is an extent to which Stroud can be read as a reluctant or closet radical. He rarely makes explicit the farthest-reaching consequences of his analyses. There is a constant tension between providing an account that is “satisfactory” in traditional terms, versus an underlying suspicion that it might be time to call the very project of epistemology (traditionally construed) into question. Pursuing that suspicion has the potential to suggest a more radical break with the epistemological tradition than is usually considered. Williams suggests that the value of countering epistemological realism with a contextual account of justification may be this very result: “a cleaner break with the epistemological tradition than even its most radical critics have typically made.”⁸⁷ But Stroud, circa *Significance*, admits his own reluctance, or inability, to see anything fundamentally wrong with, say, our traditional conception of objectivity. Except, of course, that it seems intimately involved in leading us toward scepticism. In drawing the morals of his discussion at the close of *Significance*, Stroud admits: “I am no doubt revealing my continued attachment to what [...] I called the traditional conception of objectivity [...]” We might be tempted to complain that Stroud is merely being stubborn or old-fashioned in not dropping the traditional requirement, but to this he adds quite plausibly: “I think it is very difficult to free oneself from that conception or to see how or why it cannot be correct.”⁸⁸ Stroud continues:

The challenge is to reveal the incoherence of the traditional conception, and perhaps even to supply an alternative we can understand, without falling once again into a form of idealism that conflicts with what we already know about the independence of the world or denies the intelligibility of the kind of objectivity we already make very good sense of.”⁸⁹

If I am correct in detecting the fundamental conflation at work in Stroud’s view, it would not matter if Williams or anyone else could “reveal the incoherence of the traditional conception.” Stroud is convinced, and takes it as an unargued-for premise, that the kind of understanding represented by the traditional epistemological project stems from something rooted deep in the human condition. But this consideration about the human condition is not, as Williams suggest, the result of Stroud’s adherence to the Humean view.

Recall Hume’s suggestion that “we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes.”⁹⁰ Stroud, however, disagrees. He blocks Hume’s proposed move toward a “more delicate satisfaction” by rejecting the suggestion that

if we did come to see how and why the epistemological enterprise is not fully valid, or perhaps not even fully coherent, we would then possess a satisfactory explanation of how human knowledge in general is possible.⁹¹

The scope of Stroud’s pessimism is broadened maximally by this further claim. But notice that it is only by holding tenaciously to the *original aim of traditional epistemology*, (i.e. a fully general explanation of how any knowledge at all is possible, considered all at once and from an objective, detached perspective) that Stroud is able to paint us into this corner. In other words, Stroud is denying so much as the bare possibility that our inquiry into the relation between scepticism and epistemology could be satisfied

by coming to see the traditional conception of inquiry as either fundamentally misguided or even biased in favour of the sceptical conclusion. This stems from Stroud's portrayal of epistemologists as faced with this modified dilemma, which includes blocking the possibility of revising the epistemological project:

In short, it seems that if we really were in the position the traditional account in terms of epistemic priority describes us as being in, skepticism would be correct. We could not know the things we think we know. But if, in order to resist that conclusion, we no longer see ourselves in that traditional way, we will not have a satisfactory general explanation of all our knowledge in a certain domain.⁹²

Although Stroud is reticent to ever explicitly uphold the soundness of this conditional argument for the triumph of scepticism, he does consider the history of past failures to save traditional epistemology from scepticism to weigh heavily in favour of the likelihood of continued disappointment. All of this comes together in Stroud's pronouncement of what he thinks is the likely outcome of his investigation:

[...] the threat I see is that once we really understand what we aspire to in the philosophical study of knowledge, and we do not deviate from the aspiration to understand it in that way, we will be forever unable to get the kind of understanding that would satisfy us.⁹³

There is much to recommend this formulation of the relationship between scepticism and the traditional epistemological project. All sides are agreed that if we must somehow derive or infer our knowledge of the world from some prior and privileged class of beliefs, like sense experience, scepticism will triumph. This is to say that most epistemologists do "understand what we aspire to." The epistemologist as bridge-builder has been a dismal failure. The most common response to the conditional correctness of the sceptical challenge is to favour a view of epistemology (often externalist positions like reliabilism or naturalized epistemology), which reject the demand for general

justification of our knowledge of the world based on sense experience. But that is clearly to “deviate from the aspiration” of traditional epistemology. Stroud is not alone in recognizing that if we do not deviate from this aspiration, we will face scepticism at every turn. What Stroud refuses to do is genuinely move past the traditional problematic, by accepting, as externalists and naturalized epistemologists do, a “disappointingly second-best position.”⁹⁴ As Stroud makes clear about his view when compared to Sosa’s, there is widespread agreement that dissatisfaction “is endemic to the [traditional] epistemological project itself.” That is, scepticism perpetually follows from the traditional aim of explaining how all of our knowledge is possible all at once. As Stroud puts it, “[Sosa and I] differ in what moral we draw from that thought.”⁹⁵ I think this is a shockingly simple conclusion to draw from the disagreement that follows from how to come to terms with what appears to be the consensus view that traditional epistemology ends in scepticism. Stroud agrees on many points with Williams as well, notwithstanding the very different “moral” they draw from an exploration of the aspirations and achievements of traditional epistemology.

Having examined at length Stroud and Williams’ respective treatment of the criteria and conditions that shape epistemology, I want to inspect what they actually disagree about. If we accept Williams’ fundamental categorization of himself as opposed to “pessimistic” epistemologists like Stroud, we might expect to find numerous differences, or at least one fundamental difference in orientation. First, consider the number of areas which Stroud and Williams claim to agree. Most notably, Williams does not dispute that “if we hand the sceptic his foundationalist presuppositions, there is no

refuting him: this is what that conditional correctness of scepticism consists in.”⁹⁶ Elsewhere he agrees fully with Stroud that “[t]he *conditional* correctness of scepticism cannot in the end be denied.”⁹⁷ In general, Williams usually tends to downplay points of similarity between the two. Stroud’s way of taking scepticism seriously seems to block the element of revision that Williams needs to reject epistemological realism. Stroud on the other hand, stresses a number of agreements, although he may occasionally overstate them. For Stroud’s enhanced version of the epistemologists’ dilemma blocks the possibility of finding satisfaction through the backdoor, that is, by exposing why the traditional epistemological project aimed at, and demanded, more than it could ever deliver. Stroud offers this broad sense in which his interests are similar to Williams’:

[Williams] wants to explain how and why the epistemological enterprise goes wrong and leads us down a garden path to scepticism. I share that aim. In insisting as he does that it is not as “intuitive” or “natural” as he thinks I find it, I think he exaggerates the differences between us. I agree that there must be some ideas or thoughts or ways of thinking that are responsible for things going awry [. . .].⁹⁸

They may “share that aim,” but it seems misleading to suggest that the similarity goes much deeper than that on this issue. For Stroud also holds “that once we really understand what we aspire to in the philosophical study of knowledge, and we do not deviate from the aspiration to understand it in that way, we will be forever unable to get the kind of understanding that would satisfy us.”⁹⁹ William’s reply would be that if he can show “how and why the epistemological enterprise goes wrong,” even if that involves altering some of our cherished conceptions, then “it is *unreasonable* to feel frustrated by this.”¹⁰⁰ I think this is key. Both Stroud and Williams agree that neither scepticism nor neighbouring positions (like idealism or phenomenalism which also

restrict, or at least alter, what is meant by our knowledge of the external world) are satisfactory. But only Stroud insists that we could never give up the traditional aspiration of epistemology without feeling a residual and deep-seated disappointment and dissatisfaction:

Fully facing the fact that there is no alternative to this explanation might reconcile me slightly to my bleak position, just as a new prisoner will reconcile himself to life behind bars, but that does not make the position itself any more satisfactory.¹⁰¹

How can this additional constraint on intellectual satisfaction be motivated? Stroud does not pretend to have a philosophical argument for why we should despair (let alone a transcendental argument for why we must despair) of giving up the hope of providing the kind of account that would satisfy the traditional epistemological project. Nor does he even offer the kind of loose psychological explanation that Hume attempts.

Occasionally Stroud does sound a note that would probably harmonize more with Williams' account. For instance, he sometimes suggests that the paradox of scepticism "should make us look much more critically at that way of trying to understand human knowledge in the first place."¹⁰² This is the underdeveloped suggestion that runs through all of Stroud's work on scepticism. He continually raises the prospect of seeing scepticism as something more than just a position within epistemology. Scepticism may signal a deeper and more fundamental target—the epistemological project itself:

I think scepticism in epistemology now represents, and perhaps always did represent, the possibility that such an explanation [as the traditional project seeks] is impossible; that we cannot consider all our knowledge of the world all at once and still see it as knowledge.¹⁰³

This is more in line with what Williams means when he proposes, “if [as a result of diagnosing the problematic source of scepticism as the eliminable doctrine of “epistemological realism,” we can see that] there is nothing (or not the right kind of thing) to understand, there is no need for disappointment at our failure to understand it.”¹⁰⁴ But Stroud does not draw the moral in this way. He remains firm that we are not free to reject the aim behind the traditional epistemological question any more than we are free to revise the “platitudes” and traditional epistemological concepts which give rise to scepticism. Given those strictures, “the question [is] impossible to answer satisfactorily.”¹⁰⁵

It is not clear that Stroud’s strictest requirement, namely, that we quench our “desire” or “urge” for a general epistemological theory of a certain kind or suffer inevitable dissatisfaction otherwise, is reasonable. It seems to become a psychological issue whether epistemologists, shown that they are searching for a non-existent artifact, feel compelled to continue searching, or refuse to alter the standards for what they will accept as a satisfactory answer. I think Williams is on point when he offers this alternate explanation of how epistemologists, like Stroud, should deal with coming to realize the traditional object of epistemological inquiry has turned out to be illusory:

Certain forms of inquiry can lapse, if their theoretical presuppositions can reasonably be rejected. And when they do lapse—as has happened with astrology and demonology—they do not leave behind a gap in our understanding. Rather, we decide that there was never anything to understand.¹⁰⁶

Stroud insists that philosophers will feel like they have settled on a lesser epistemology if it fails to conform with our long-standing epistemological “aspirations.” His pessimism about our necessarily unsatisfactory attempts to devise non-sceptical

epistemologies seems to gain strength from his overstatement of the level of entrenchment that these aspirations could possibly have achieved in our tradition, considering that they are relatively young in the history of philosophy. But this, we have seen, is not where Stroud goes wrong. His inability to allow for the possibility of any kind of satisfactory revision originates in his unwavering resolve that the traditional questions of epistemology arise, not merely from contingent features of our tradition, but from an urge embedded deep in human nature itself.

Williams, on the other hand, is open to seeing the aspiration of traditional epistemology as the result of a deeply-rooted mistake that runs no deeper than our attachment to the problematic notion of epistemological realism. If I understand him correctly, Williams delivers us from scepticism, but oddly enough, his “solution” does not have the positive consequence of securing how we do indeed know anything about the world in the way that traditional epistemology has demanded. In blocking the move to scepticism, he (necessarily) blocks the possibility of accounting, in general terms, for the possibility of our knowledge of the external world. If this is victory, it is hard to imagine why anyone would be interested in waging the battle. Or perhaps this negative reaction to the modesty of a contextualist epistemology has to do with the growing pains of revising the self-image that epistemologists have inherited. In part, this formerly aggrandized view of epistemology as first-philosophy may have been a direct result of believing in the possibility of satisfying the lofty (and now seemingly chimerical) aspiration of traditional epistemology. Philosophers—feeling entrusted with the task of analyzing the whole of knowledge—tend to present their task as somehow conducting investigations that are

more rigorous than other disciplines. The upside of Williams' contextualist view is that it rejects the traditional view of philosophers as conducting their research away from the practical constraints of both everyday investigations and those of particular disciplines only to return to the everyday world to pass final judgment. This takes the form of either correcting knowledge claims made in other disciplines, or at least to pointing out that whatever we may call "knowledge" for ordinary (or practical) purposes, does not qualify as knowledge in the fully justified sense of what would be required to defend it against philosophically sophisticated sceptical challenges. Such an attitude naturally leads to the assumption that there are at least two senses of knowing. On one hand, philosophical knowing is considered a robust conception that is aware of the full requirements of knowledge (which may involve technical disputes about the principle of denying closure under known logical entailment, a worked out theory of what makes an alternative relevant or not relevant). Contrasted with that are lesser ways of knowing that amount merely to "knowledge for all practical purposes," or unreflective belief that can carry warrant for their assertion but not the justification required to count as knowledge. So, if epistemologists are to shift toward contextualist views, it must come with an acknowledgement that there is nothing privileged about the verdict on knowledge handed down by epistemologists. The traditional project of epistemological inquiry *or any other proposed successor project* will necessarily rely on criteria of satisfaction that are not themselves grounded, or capable of rational justification. We have traced the debate into metaphilosophical terrain, where nothing (not traditional criteria derived from our modern ancestors in epistemology, nor formal constraints about the canons of good reasoning,

and certainly not intuition-driven criteria of intellectual satisfaction) can be taken as given or justified beyond the requirements or “methodological necessities” of a particular form of inquiry. Once the debate is pushed (by a kind of metaphilosophical ascent) into a discussion about even the most fundamental criteria by which to judge the adequacy and worth of particular projects, the grounds from which to choose to pursue or ignore any particular kind of inquiry become as questionable as the projects themselves. In the final chapter, I will explore the possibility that we can or should find relief in allowing ourselves to be guided either by deeply-rooted intuitions or pragmatic considerations about what comfort a theory of knowledge may have traditionally promised.

If Williams succeeds in convincing us of the context-dependence of any and all claims about whether one can be said to have knowledge, it is only at the cost of radically altering what has been the traditional self-image of epistemologists. Consider the picture presented toward the end of *Unnatural Doubts*:

But I have never denied that the sceptic is conditionally correct, in the sense that, by the standards he insists on applying, we never know anything about the world. My point has always been that these standards are something *we* apply. They are not built into the human condition but into a particular intellectual project, itself far from theory free, and *standards that are brought into play by a particular project have no claim on us outside of it.*¹⁰⁷

Williams, then, in denying that there is anything like a context-invariant structure to knowledge or classes of beliefs, would be committed to a view similar to what emerged in Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. On such a view, epistemology (and philosophy in general) should stop being viewed as the privileged arbiter of knowledge *across all domains*. That is, we should stop seeing epistemology as able to judge all other disciplines and their knowledge claims, as if the peculiar constraints and

criteria of satisfaction derived from the philosophical tradition are somehow binding on all human thought, perhaps because it represents inquiry in its purest form.

If we see the clash of final positions between Stroud and Williams as representative of a familiar impasse in contemporary epistemology (roughly, between more traditionally-minded philosophers versus those who are willing to revise not only elements of the discipline but also the self-image of its practitioners) we can ask: Are epistemologists, after Williams, in a better position to deny the force of sceptical challenges? The answer to this seems moot. Williams is as powerless to deny Stroud his sense of the dissatisfaction tied to realizing the impossibility of this comprehensible aim, as Stroud is to argue for the necessity of feeling this way. His complex theoretical diagnosis can do nothing to touch the third horn of Stroud's trilemma of dissatisfaction: If we could ever convince ourselves that the traditional question cannot be answered by creatures like us, we would remain frustrated and dissatisfied, because

being constitutionally unable to arrive at an answer to a perfectly comprehensible question is not satisfactory either. We therefore continue to acquiesce in the traditional problem and do not acknowledge that there is no satisfactory solution. We proceed as if it must be possible to find an answer [...].¹⁰⁸

On the other hand, Stroud cannot get beyond the mere intuition-driven criteria of intellectual satisfaction stipulating that we would feel as dissatisfied by this wholesale rejection of epistemology as we would by continuing to pursue and fail at the traditional task. At this point, where intuitions about satisfaction clash, and when competing metaphilosophical constraints are put into question, we begin to get the sense that this debate is not anchored in such a way that we could establish a single conclusion. Disagreements are not limited to assessments of the propriety of particular applications of

the various criteria of satisfaction (traditional, formal, and intuition-driven), but flare up at the metaphilosophical level where everything seems to be equally up for grabs. We begin to see that following a particular debate *within* epistemology (the scepticism debate) can lead to unsettling suggestions about the viability of the entire project. Since we lack stability at the metaphilosophical level of criteria of satisfaction and adjudication, should we become cynical about proposals for settling the first order disputes that arise within a discipline? If this is so, do we have any wiggle room to avoid suggestions like the following?

Even though we cannot get agreement among competent philosophers, even within the same analytic and scientific tradition, it is surely well worth while to try to clarify the metaphysical issues and to get agreement at least between likeminded philosophers.¹⁰⁹

Even if our prospects for agreement in philosophy have never been better than this, to embrace such a modest conception of philosophy carries with it the prospect of radically revising the discipline's self-image. Perhaps Hume is correct after all to suggest that the greatest lesson of encountering the force of scepticism is to induce modesty. This modesty would reign by reducing traditional pretensions to certainty and completeness in philosophy and science, and tempering the ambitious assumption that we ought to be able to secure rational insight into the whole of nature—of which we are merely a part. Put this way, we are reminded of why scepticism and the prospect of revision are so troubling to epistemology: they threaten to radically alter the self-image of philosophy.

Perhaps the ultimate lesson to be learned from the contemporary debate about scepticism will be found in the wider issue of questioning the value of the traditional epistemological project itself. In this way, we can see why intense scrutiny into the

problem of scepticism in recent years need not be anomalous within the wider contemporary discussion about the possibility of epistemology's end or transformation. To the contrary, I have tried to show how the contemporary debate about scepticism can be seen as a case study by which we can make intelligible, and perhaps even clarify, the often puzzling claim that epistemology has died. We have seen that the contemporary debate about scepticism has reached an impasse based on metaphilosophical disagreements about various criteria of satisfaction, and an inability to construct arguments that are consented to beyond mere *conditional* agreement. All sides agree about the conditional correctness of certain sceptical arguments. Likewise, there is conditional agreement about what would be required to secure our knowledge of the world. But nothing can be agreed on to cancel out the *ifs* in these conditional arguments since the acceptance of given premises or, more fundamentally, the acceptance of certain strictures for and against kinds of argumentation and theory construction are chased up to the realm of metaphilosophical principles.

Although the suggestion is undeveloped in *Unnatural Doubts*, Williams has stated elsewhere that coming to grips with scepticism may involve the recognition that the issue's importance is "primarily meta-philosophical."¹⁰ If modern epistemology has become fixated on explaining, in the face of the sceptical challenge, how knowledge of the world is possible; and if this task can now be seen to be hopelessly flawed, since dependent on questionable theoretical assumptions; can we conclude that the project of traditional epistemology itself *was* merely, in Richard Rorty's words, "A bad answer to a bad question"? We must move slowly here though, on pain of courting a version of the

ubiquitous “epistemologist’s dilemma.” In the final chapter, I will take up the question of our prospects for radically revising, or even abandoning, the traditional epistemological project. The underlying issue which has hovered around this entire discussion concerns how we might satisfactorily change the subject, if indeed, we have become convinced that the traditional understanding of the epistemological task (providing a detached, objective assessment of the totality of our knowledge of the world, given in completely general terms) is doomed to failure. What is at stake is nothing less than the future of the traditional epistemological enterprise. In Chapter 4, I will argue that any hope of meeting with success in the future holds the prospect of first squarely facing the past.

I will suggest that pessimism, despair and dissatisfaction are not our only available reactions. But this is not because Williams, or any one else, has shown the way around sceptical obstacles blocking our grasp of a fully general explanatory theory of knowledge. It will be seen rather as the consequence of taking a less intimate view of the inherited epistemological tradition: a view, in the spirit of Hume’s, which recognizes the possibility of letting go of unrealistic aspirations, and coming to better understand why it is such a difficult psychological task to accomplish. I will also propose a diagnosis of just what is so troubling to traditional epistemologists about the prospect failing to secure rationally justified knowledge. With these considerations in mind, I will propose an alternate assessment of the failure of traditional epistemology that eschews either label of optimistic or pessimistic.

NOTES

¹ Barry Stroud, "Scepticism, 'Externalism,' and the Goal of Epistemology," in *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 294.

² Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 292.

³ Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), ix.

⁴ Stroud, *Significance*, ix.

⁵ Michael Williams, "Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism," *Mind* 97 (1988): 416.

⁶ Stroud, *Significance*, 76.

⁷ Stroud, *Significance*, 82.

⁸ Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), xix.

⁹ In a paper that serves to summarize his argument in *Unnatural*, Williams prefaces his discussion by claiming: "My aim in this paper is to counter what strikes me as a growing pessimism about our prospects for coming up with a satisfactory theoretical response to scepticism about our knowledge of the external world," "Epistemological Realism," 415.

¹⁰ Williams, *Unnatural*, xv.

¹¹ Williams discusses the nature of these constraints in depth in *Unnatural*, 121-125.

¹² Williams exposes this assumption and its role in motivating the apparent intuitiveness of traditional epistemology in *Unnatural*, 211-218.

¹³ Stroud's critique of G.E. Moore's strategy rests on the claim that "Moore's proof can be taken as similar in intention and achievement to the proofs we give and accept in everyday life [...]," *Significance*, 128. It's not that Moore is mistaken in thinking that he can *ordinarily* use his hands as examples of material, external objects, it's just that such a move is disallowed in the quest for a completely general account of knowledge taken all at once. Simply put, Moore is talking past the sceptic by failing to recognize the constraints of absolute generality, totality, and detachment specified by the traditional project. Moreover, these constraints follow naturally from the philosophical project and are not, as some would complain, a distortion of everyday requirements, nor artificially inflated. See especially *Significance*, Chapter 3.

¹⁴ Stroud, *Significance*, 1.

¹⁵ Stroud, *Significance*, ix.

¹⁶ See Barry Stroud, "Scepticism, 'Externalism,' and the Goal of Epistemology," in *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 292-304.

¹⁷ Williams, *Unnatural*, 22. See also, "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56(2) (1996): 364-365.

¹⁸ Stroud, "Skepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy* 81(10) (1984): 549.

¹⁹ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 303.

²⁰ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 297.

²¹ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 293.

²² Stroud, "Epistemological Reflection on Knowledge of the External World," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56(2) (1996): 348.

²³ Stroud, *Significance*, 274.

²⁴ Stroud, *Significance*, 256.

²⁵ Stroud, *Significance*, 209.

²⁶ Williams, *Unnatural*, 356.

²⁷ See Ernest Sosa, "Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity," in *Scepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Keith DeRose and Ted Warfield (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93-114, especially 100.

²⁸ Williams, *Unnatural*, 22.

²⁹ Stroud, *Significance*, 78-79.

³⁰ Stroud, *Significance*, 81-82.

³¹ Stroud, *Significance*, 82.

³² Stroud, *Significance*, 273.

³³ For the original charge of circularity and Descartes' reply, see the abbreviated "Objections and Replies" in Descartes, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 139-143.

³⁴ Examples can be found in Stroud, *Significance*, 160, 180, 202, 223, and in Williams *Unnatural*, 170, 306, 334.

³⁵ For instances in Stroud see *Significance*, 34-35, 168-9, 187-8, 205. For examples in Williams see *Unnatural*, xiv, 19, 22, 39, 221.

³⁶ Barry Stroud, "Skepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge," 545.

³⁷ Stroud, "Understanding Human Knowledge in General," in *Knowledge and Skepticism*, ed. Marjorie Clay and Keith Lehrer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 32.

³⁸ Stroud, *Significance*, 168. Williams quotes this assessment with approval in "The Unreality of Knowledge," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 19: *Meta-Philosophie. Reconstructing Philosophy?: New Essays on Metaphilosophy*, ed. Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nelson (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1993): 272-273, and also in "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically," 365.

³⁹ Williams, *Unnatural*, 22.

⁴⁰ Williams, "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically," 365.

⁴¹ Stroud, "Understanding," 32.

⁴² Williams quotes Nagel's conclusion in *The View From Nowhere* that "Our problem [...] has no solution, but to recognize that is to come as near as we can to living in light of the truth." Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 231; qtd. in Williams, *Unnatural*, 16.

⁴³ Stroud, "Understanding," 32.

⁴⁴ J.C.C. Smart, "Why Philosophers Disagree," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. Supplementary Volume 19: *Meta-Philosophie. Reconstructing Philosophy?: New Essays on Metaphilosophy*, ed. Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nelson. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1993): 71.

⁴⁵ Williams, *Unnatural*, xvi-xvii.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Unnatural*, xvii.

⁴⁷ For one instance, see Michael Williams, "Still Unnatural: A Reply To Vogel and Rorty," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 22 (1997): 30.

⁴⁸ Williams, "Still Unnatural," 30, emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Williams, "Still Unnatural," 30, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ Williams, "Still Unnatural," 30.

⁵¹ Michael Williams, "Realism and Scepticism," in *Reality, Representation, and Projection*, ed. John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 205, emphasis in original.

⁵² Williams, "Still Unnatural," 33.

⁵³ Williams, "Epistemological Realism," 425.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Unnatural*, 116.

⁵⁵ Stroud, *Significance*, 39.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Unnatural*, 73.

⁵⁷ Stroud, *Significance*, 31-32, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ Williams develops these ideas in *Unnatural*, 68-79. I will return to examine them further below.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Unnatural*, 17.

⁶⁰ Williams, "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically," 368.

⁶¹ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 293.

⁶² Williams, "Epistemological Realism," 419, emphases in original.

⁶³ Williams, "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically," 369.

⁶⁴ The quotation comes from *Unnatural*, 119. Contextualist theories of justification come in many forms, and any claims made by Williams (or myself) are meant to apply solely to his particular formulation. The common feature of contextualist views, if there is one, is an allegiance to trying to flesh out Wittgenstein's later insights.

⁶⁵ See Williams, *Unnatural*, 166-167.

⁶⁶ Williams, *Unnatural*, 317.

⁶⁷ Williams, *Unnatural*, 287.

⁶⁸ Williams, "Still Unnatural," 38.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Unnatural*, 354.

⁷⁰ Williams, "Still Unnatural," 38.

⁷¹ Williams, *Unnatural*, 119, emphasis added.

⁷² Williams, *Unnatural*, 354.

⁷³ Williams takes stock of this objection in *Unnatural*, 45ff. He fails to get beyond the claim that when his diagnosis exposes epistemological realism as the theoretical

bloodline of scepticism, and he supplies the alternative conceptualization of justification in thoroughly contextual terms, we will cease to feel tied to the traditional legitimizing aim of the traditional project.

⁷⁴ Stroud, "Epistemological Reflection," 356.

⁷⁵ Stroud, "Understanding," 49.

⁷⁶ Stroud, *Significance*, 39.

⁷⁷ Stroud, "Understanding," 38, 48.

⁷⁸ Williams, *Unnatural*, 200.

⁷⁹ Stroud, *Significance*, viii.

⁸⁰ Williams, *Unnatural*, 359.

⁸¹ Williams, *Unnatural*, 359.

⁸² Stroud, "Understanding," 32.

⁸³ Stroud, *Significance*, x, emphasis added.

⁸⁴ Stroud, "Understanding," 32.

⁸⁵ Barry Stroud, "Epistemological Reflection," 347.

⁸⁶ Stroud, *Significance*, 39.

⁸⁷ Williams, "The Unreality of Knowledge," 274.

⁸⁸ Stroud, *Significance*, 273.

⁸⁹ Stroud, *Significance*, 274.

⁹⁰ Hume, *Treatise*, xviii.

⁹¹ Stroud, "Understanding," 49.

⁹² Stroud, "Understanding," 36.

⁹³ Stroud, "Understanding," 32.

⁹⁴ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 302.

⁹⁵ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 303.

⁹⁶ Williams, "Epistemological Realism," 417.

⁹⁷ Williams, *Unnatural*, 56.

⁹⁸ Stroud, "Epistemological Reflection," 349.

⁹⁹ Stroud, "Understanding," 32.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically," 378, emphasis added.

¹⁰¹ Stroud, *Significance*, 166.

¹⁰² Stroud, "Understanding," 32.

¹⁰³ Stroud, "Skepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge," 551.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically," 378.

¹⁰⁵ Stroud, "Epistemological Reflection," 354.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically," 376.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Unnatural*, 354, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Stroud, "Understanding," 32.

¹⁰⁹ Smart, "Why Philosophers Disagree," 81.

¹¹⁰ Williams, "The Unreality of Knowledge," 265.

CHAPTER 4: Beyond Scepticism and Epistemology, Toward Metaphilosophy

The natural result of any search for something is that the searchers either find it, or they deny it can be found and profess its ungraspability (*akatalepsia*), or they keep on searching. (1: *PH* 1 1)

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Empiricism*¹

4.1 What now then?

In the previous chapter, I sketched an overview of the contemporary debate about scepticism. One of the valuable findings reported there is the prevalence of a certain type of fundamental agreement. The important thing to notice is that the nature of these agreements is almost exclusively conditional or hypothetical. That is, near-consensus has been reached on a number of issues, formulated along the lines of “*If* we start with the aim of preserving intuitions *x*, *y*, and *z*, *then* we will be led to scepticism.” Or “if we could find independent grounds to establish *p*, *r*, and *s*, then we could say that the most devastating strength of global sceptical positions would be blocked.” For instance, all sides can agree that *if* one grants the legitimacy of Descartes’ dream-possibility requirement as a relevant alternative that must be defeated to salvage knowledge claims; or *if* one grants the Humean-empiricist account of impressions and ideas, and denies his naturalistic account of belief, *then* we have to accept scepticism as the outcome of our philosophical search for the possibility of possessing knowledge. Once armed with an argument that is agreed upon to be valid, the challenge is to substantiate the premises and considerations that favour adopting the conclusion. This, it seems, is an elementary fact about argumentation. Nevertheless, this is exactly where the process stalls in trying to

substantiate a non-sceptical epistemology. The quest is to find independent evidence or confirmation for any given theory of perception or belief-formation. (For that matter, the circularity we are courting may very well block the establishment of a fully sceptical epistemology.) However, even if both sceptical and non-sceptical epistemologies fail to provide a dialectically acceptable argument, it would be hard to deny that scepticism would then triumph at a meta-level.

Let's review how Stroud and Williams differ on the thematic question of whether epistemologists ought to be pessimistic about our prospect of fulfilling the traditional aspiration of epistemology. It is substantially agreed that the strength of scepticism seems to be derived from a number of fundamental epistemological constraints: that objectivity should be conceived as detached assessment of a mind-independent world; that there is some sort of immediacy attached to our experiential knowledge of the world that makes it prior to so-called knowledge of an external world; and a requirement that holds that we need a justificatory or legitimating account of the totality of our knowledge considered all at once. Stroud certainly feels the pressure to overcome scepticism without thereby denying or revising basic epistemological concepts or goals. Williams, on the other hand, is adamant that what is needed to deny the inevitability of scepticism is to alter our view of justification—which he contends is misleading us into considering scepticism as the final verdict on human knowledge. The question becomes: how, if at all, can we justify eliminating or revising the criteria of satisfaction that seem to be inseparable from the traditional project? As we saw in Chapter 3, the request for a completely general account of how all of our knowledge is possible seems like a reasonable request. Moreover,

attempts to show that the request is confused in some way tend to be less compelling than the considerations that give rise to scepticism in the first place. The goal is to construct a theoretical explanation of how it is possible to know anything about an external world *given* the formal, traditional, and intuition-driven criteria of satisfaction. Failing this, we must motivate our revision of at least some of the criteria by which we have been judging success.

In this final chapter, I want to introduce some ancient sceptical concerns, which have not been considered yet in this study. They were not raised in the last chapter, since both Stroud and Williams bracket their interest in the modern problem of scepticism of the external world from most of the pre-modern sceptical tradition. Stroud and Williams are both up front about their singular focus on modern external world scepticism, but for different reasons. Stroud admits that he overlooks that tradition in *Significance*, and suggests merely that it “is a subject I wish I knew more about.”² Williams too prefaces *Unnatural* with the announcement that his focus will be primarily on modern, external world scepticism.³ However, he briefly treats some basic ancient sceptical concerns, concluding, mistakenly I will argue, that “the ancient problem [...] has no particular connection with the modern problem of our knowledge of the external world.”⁴ Above all, I will contend that the relation of scepticism to epistemology is not a problem concerning the justification of any one knowledge claim (such as the existence of the external world) but rather, a metaphilosophical problem about how to determine the status of criteria of satisfaction. Sensitivity to sceptical problems seen as challenges to justification is not most urgently concerned with whether we can satisfactorily complete

the general legitimating project, but whether we can defend how we intend to get it off the ground. In Chapter 4.3, I will deal with a version of the problem of the criterion that concerns the evaluation of theoretical adequacy.

Stroud ignited interest in the question concerning scepticism by trying to explore what “significance” philosophical scepticism might have. Importantly, he wanted to discover this significance, even if no one seriously considers implementing the sceptical conclusion in theory or practice. This raises the title question of Chapter 1, which asks, “Why should we bother investigating scepticism?” Following Stroud and Williams, I think the “significance” or import of the contemporary debate about scepticism can be found solely within the admittedly peculiar realm of epistemological inquiry, and what it might tell us about more generally about what we have traditionally expected from philosophical theories. An examination of scepticism within epistemology points beyond itself, into metaphilosophical disputes about the propriety of revision, and the limits of the traditional self-image of the discipline. As I outlined in Chapter 3, I strongly disagree with Stroud’s further claim that the urge to understand knowledge in this way likely stems from something “deep within human nature.” However, I am just as opposed to Williams’ suggestion that once we recognize the theoretical groundwork of scepticism, epistemologists can reasonably cease to be pessimistic when it comes to the prospects of traditional epistemology.

At this point in the debate about scepticism, we now face (as we always do) the three choices Sextus Empiricus outlines in this chapter’s epigraph: (a) we can claim to have found the solution we have been seeking, or (b) claim that the problem is insoluble,

or (c) proceed with the investigation. Opting for (c), of course, is not so much a conclusion as it is an invitation to continue to pursue the possibility of arriving at the first or second conclusions. I think that we have good reason to think that none of these options, taken in a straightforward manner, represents our position with regard to the question concerning scepticism. I will structure the discussion in this chapter around the prospects of these three possible outcomes to our investigation.

Of these three broad directions, I begin by reviewing the prospect of (b). Regarding the possibility that we may assert that the problem is insoluble, we have already seen that Stroud hints at the “pessimistic” possibility that the lesson of scepticism might be that the aspiration for a certain type of understanding, which is characteristic of the traditional epistemological project, may be forever out of reach. In other words, a sufficiently deep investigation into the failure of traditional epistemology to rule out the sceptical possibility, might lead us to cast suspicion on the coherence of the traditional epistemological project. More importantly, a sensitivity to the role that metaphilosophical criteria of satisfaction play both in defining the scope and limits of epistemological inquiry, and in supporting the vitality of sceptical challenges, can give further support to the suspicion that the goal of traditional epistemology is impossible to achieve. Recall Stroud’s suggestion that “once we really understand what we aspire to in the philosophical study of knowledge, and we do not deviate from the aspiration to understand it in that way, we will be forever unable to get the kind of understanding that would satisfy us.”⁵ Recognizing our inability to avoid scepticism within the traditional strictures of epistemology, coupled with a sense that significant revision to the criteria of

satisfaction amounts to conceding scepticism in a round-about way, suggests the pessimistic moral that we are doomed to dissatisfaction with regard to philosophical theories of knowledge. On this view, opting for (c) is possible only if we act as philosophical ostriches:

If scepticism really is the inevitable outcome of trying to understand human knowledge in a certain way, and we think it simply could not be correct, that should make us look much more critically at that way of trying to understand human knowledge in the first place. But that is not what typically happens in philosophy. The goal itself is scarcely questioned, and for good reason. We feel human knowledge ought to be intelligible in that way. The epistemological project feels like the pursuit of a perfectly comprehensible goal. We know that scepticism is no good; it is an answer but it is not satisfactory. But being constitutionally unable to arrive at an answer to a perfectly comprehensible question is not satisfactory either. We therefore continue to acquiesce in the traditional problem and do not acknowledge that [b] there is no satisfactory solution. We proceed as if [c] it must be possible to find an answer, so we deny the force, and even the interest of scepticism.⁶

Below I will take up a few more of the threads in this passage. For now, what concerns us is Stroud's suggestion that although epistemologists resist (b), in order to keep (c) open, this may only be accomplished at the cost of missing what valuable lesson scepticism may have to offer: *traditional epistemology is constrained by a goal and by criteria of satisfaction that can never be adequately fulfilled.*

Although there have been numerous instances of individual philosophers claiming to achieve (a), subsequent evaluations of their allegedly definitive refutations have been shown to be incomplete, or at any rate, not entirely successful or satisfactory. This very fact is seen by some philosophers to act as a sort of argument from the history of failure. Let us consider this fact: No solution or dissolution of scepticism has yet been tabled that has gained widespread consensus (let alone unanimous) acceptance. Stroud motivates his

choice of studying the anti-sceptical arguments of Moore, Carnap, Kant, and Quine because he has “been strongly tempted, and in some cases actually convinced, by each of them at one time or another.”⁷ Since he has come to find each of those formerly endorsed views to be ultimately unsatisfactory, he has become very distrustful of the possible success of any traditional epistemological response to scepticism. “Dissatisfaction with each of them in turn,” Stroud admits, “no doubt contributed to my present preoccupation with the nature or point—or even the possibility—of a philosophical theory of knowledge as such.”⁸ This description is actually similar to a pattern of sceptical argument, which has been known since antiquity, by the umbrella term *argument from error*. Once it is recognized that beliefs formerly held to be certain or at least justified, have turned out to be false it is difficult to trust any currently felt certainty or justification for holding similar beliefs. It is not that one instance of error (and thus the possibility of error) can be generalized to the conclusion that all beliefs might be in error. Rather, it invokes a general problem about *distinguishing* between cases of current knowledge claims that we want to assert with confidence, and former knowledge claims that turned out to be mistaken. The basic form looks like this:

- (1) In the past, I have confidently claimed to know various things.
- (2) On occasion, I have discovered later that I was mistaken.

Now it would be fallacious to take these premises to support the generalization that since I have sometimes been in error, I might *always* be wrong. But that is not necessary to introduce the possibility of scepticism, by way of destabilizing all knowledge claims. What we can assert is

- (3) If I cannot isolate the feature of what I had taken for evidence in past cases, which turned out to be in error, I cannot rule out, in any given case, the possibility that my current knowledge claim is false, or supported by insufficient evidence.

Such an argument may not get us to the radical sceptical conclusion about the external world, but it will serve to induce modesty into any and every knowledge claim under consideration. For Stroud, this inability to isolate exactly where each attempt to propose a non-sceptical epistemology goes wrong inspires his suspicion that given the traditional strictures on theoretical adequacy, scepticism may be the only answer to the traditional project. To assuage concerns that Stroud may foreclose too hastily on the possibility of a satisfactory response, I will examine (in Chapter 4.2) recent promising proposals for naturalizing and externalizing epistemology.

I commented in the opening chapter that there are obvious reasons why a problem such as explaining the possibility of our knowledge of the external world is often seen as a particularly “academic” exercise, or what I called a “philosopher’s philosophy problem.” This may seem confirmed by the suggestion of many epistemologists that even in the face of the sceptical challenge, there remains untouched something like “knowledge-for-all-practical-purposes,” that is, an “ordinary” or “plain” (or non-philosophical) sense of “knowing.” Furthermore, the trend toward cleaving the issue of a proposition’s status as a true belief, from its status as having “warranted assertability” conditions in certain conversational settings seem to further suggest that what is at issue may not matter outside of the narrow concern of epistemologists. However, the lack of interest in the problem outside of philosophy or even outside of other areas of philosophy need not count as repudiation of the problem’s interest or worth. It is generally agreed

that just because the chemist does not need to discount the possibility that she was dreaming when she was ostensibly conducting her experiment, or that the historian need not address the possibility that the earth was created five minutes before her birth, does not mean that these questions are not appropriate for the epistemologist to consider.⁹ These assumptions, rather, to use Williams' phrase, are "methodological necessities" of undertaking those particular forms of inquiry. If epistemology can (or must) be pursued without these or similar methodological necessities, this is not necessarily a knock against epistemology. It should, however, motivate us to seek whether the requirements of the epistemological project can really do without similar methodological necessities. The upside of Williams' contextualization of knowledge and justification is that we are forced to abandon any preconceived notion of epistemology as a rigorous and pure, presuppositionless inquiry into what it really means to know.

What is more interesting is that even within the restricted domain of epistemology, the intense contemporary interest in the problem of the external world can seem anomalous. What makes the widespread interest in scepticism in the past twenty years so peculiar is that it has been played out against a persistent dialogue *within epistemology* that calls into question the value, and even possibility, of continuing to pursue traditional epistemological questions. It is not surprising that chemists or historians are not concerned to formulate theories that address the possibility of external world scepticism, but what are we to make of the trend among some epistemologists to share this seemingly dismissive attitude? Five years before Stroud published *Significance* (the book largely responsible for sparking the recent 20-year wave of debate about

scepticism), Richard Rorty published *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, which sought to call into question the feasibility of epistemology by attacking its traditional self-image as the privileged arbiter of distinctive questions about knowledge. As Charles Taylor puts it, that book “helped both to crystallize and to accelerate a trend toward the repudiation of the whole epistemological enterprise.”¹⁰ Rorty’s suggestion that epistemological questions might be handled better by some other kind of inquiry¹¹ dovetailed thematically, although not substantively, with the naturalized epistemology movement instigated by Quine. Both called for the end of traditional epistemological investigation in favour of a successor discipline; in Quine’s case, the replacement methodology comes from empirical psychology. Stroud dealt specifically with Quine’s proposal, suggesting that ultimately whatever Quine was attempting to respond to, it was not the traditional sceptical challenge. This raises the question that has lurked behind a number of considerations in the previous chapters, concerning the relation between what we recognize as the “traditional” conception of epistemology, objectivity, philosophical inquiry, etc. and the suggestion made in various ways by various philosophers that in order to overcome the perpetual frustration and disappointment arising from traditional epistemology we might have to revise the traditional conception of epistemological investigation, including core intuitions and criteria of satisfaction. How are we to adjudicate between calls for reform and the counter-suggestion that revisionist philosophers are *merely* changing the subject?

The troubling consequence of this metaphilosophical impasse is that *if* each side of the debate (roughly those willing to revise epistemological concepts, lest we succumb

to the challenge of scepticism, on the one hand, and those who hold that instead we must find a way around scepticism that does justice to our traditional intuitions, on pain of conceding too much to the position of scepticism, on the other) holds to their metaphilosophical starting points, we have effectively reached a stalemate. The other consideration that adds to the intractability of the situation is that there does not seem to be incentive on either side to move away from one's favoured assumptions. Nor does it seem like non-circular arguments can be adduced by either side to solidify their chosen criteria of satisfaction. Since calling starting points "assumptions" or "presuppositions" tends to make them sound unsavoury, analytic philosophers have often preferred to call them "intuitions" instead. Appeals to intuitions, if deemed appropriate, might save us from this problem. However, as I will examine below, there are strong reasons to question the validity of allowing intuitions to do the substantial work of recommending epistemological theories. It could only be by securing these criteria of satisfaction on *independent grounds* that we might establish any given conception of inquiry without facing the charges of merely begging the question.

Contrary to the view considered at the outset of this study (namely, that renewed interest and in the study of a traditional epistemological question like scepticism suggests that claims of the demise of epistemology have been greatly exaggerated), it now seems that on closer examination, the contemporary impasse regarding scepticism leads us back to the most fundamental, and perhaps intractable, problem facing epistemology—and perhaps all philosophy: the problem of the criterion, which properly understood, is a metaphilosophical issue. The question becomes: Is it intellectually credible to carry on

with what I will call “business-as-usual philosophy” in light of fundamental questions about the nature of the discipline? How this most fundamental metaphilosophical issue relates both to the specific case of scepticism and the more general project of epistemology will be discussed below.

4.2 Naturalism, Externalism, and the Problems of Circularity and Revision

I can sympathize with a reader who feels that Stroud’s claim of inevitable dissatisfaction is, at least at this point, premature. In Chapter 3, I discussed Williams’ contextualist theory of justification as an alternative not only to scepticism, but also as an alternative to traditional epistemology itself. I will now consider a couple of related strategies that have been favoured in the contemporary debate. In countering the epistemological realism lurking behind foundationalist assumptions, Williams acknowledges the concomitant “externalist” element in his position. The classification in epistemology between internalist and externalist theories of knowledge has come to revolve around the question of *whether one must know that they know* in order to satisfy the full conditions of knowledge. This can be pursued narrowly, in the sense of testing any particular knowledge claim. Taken in its broadest formulation, however, it concerns whether one’s criteria for belief-acceptance must be known to be true (or reliable), or whether it is enough that the mechanism *is* reliable, regardless of whether the individual knows that it is. The difference can be put in terms of a first-person versus a third-person view of knowledge attribution. An internalist conception of epistemology claims that the factors important for justification must be internal to the knower, that is, knowledge is to ascribed or denied based on factors available from a first-person perspective. An

externalist account of knowledge and justification, on the other hand, denies that one must meet this requirement; it is enough, on externalist accounts, that from a third-person perspective someone could see that an individual does in fact hold a true belief that was formed in a reliable way.

Before examining Ernest Sosa's reliabilist brand of externalism, I will turn to W.V. Quine's proposal for naturalizing epistemology. Keep in mind that we are considering both of these alternative approaches to knowledge and justification as a way of further inspecting Stroud's claim that the epistemological project faces us with inevitable dissatisfaction. Quine motivates his redrawing of the epistemological landscape by first distinguishing between what he calls the "conceptual" and "doctrinal" questions of epistemology. He identifies the former issue with "meaning," and the latter with "truth." The conceptual question with regard to epistemology faces the task of "explaining the notion of body in sensory terms."¹² The doctrinal side concerns how we might justify knowledge claims about the world, while relying only on sensory terms. Hume's scepticism amounted to denying that the doctrinal question could be answered. In other words, we cannot hope to secure knowledge of the external world based solely on sense information. Quine summarizes this traditional aspect of epistemology this way: "On the doctrinal side, I do not see that we are farther along today than where Hume left us. The Humean predicament is the human predicament."¹³ The problem now, as it was for Hume, is to decide how to settle this issue, once it is acknowledged that there are no plausible alternatives to sense experience to play this grounding role. Hume famously despaired over this topic, and his tone (especially in the *Treatise*) reflected his conviction

that scepticism was the only answer to this “doctrinal” question. Without denying the force and importance of this purported discovery, Hume went on to formulate an account of natural belief that could explain our attachment to our most deeply held beliefs, despite the fact that they could never be defended by rational argument.

Quine is well aware of Hume’s despair. It might be misleading to say further that he sympathizes with the sentiment. Quine suggests that having witnessed “Carnap’s heroic efforts” to sort out the conceptual question, even though his project of “rational reconstruction” could not hope to solve the doctrinal problem, should prompt us to ask different questions: “The stimulation of his sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody ever has to go on, ultimately in arriving at his picture of the world. Why not just see how this construction really proceeds? Why not settle for psychology?”¹⁴ One reason to think that settling for psychology would not suffice is that Hume’s implicit suggestion to the same effect often led to the dismissive criticism from epistemologists that whatever Hume was up to, it was not philosophy. Thus, he was discounted for ‘merely doing psychology,’ or for ‘not really doing philosophy.’ I think this standard criticism is misguided, since if Hume’s overall account of the human condition is correct, it is surely *philosophically interesting* to learn of the limits of rationality and traditional inquiry. However, considering Stroud’s scruples, Quine’s proposal for seeing epistemology as continuous with psychology and science will be unsatisfactory unless it addresses the demand for a general legitimating account of how we get from sense experience to robust beliefs about an independent world.

By design, however, Quine's naturalizing project takes off from the acknowledged impossibility of satisfying the doctrinal concern of wholesale justification. It is not surprising then, to have Stroud suggest that "whatever Quine's naturalized epistemology is meant to do it could not answer the very question that proved so difficult to the traditional epistemologist."¹⁵ Stroud's complaint is twofold: The issue of wholesale validation or legitimation is not only bracketed from the naturalized project, but the traditional demand is acknowledged to be a failure. In this way, Quine's own project starts after accepting the argument from despair, which holds that traditional epistemology has always failed, and, if pursued still, is bound to continue the historical pattern of disappointment. The key to Quine's naturalized project, and the reason why Stroud can insist that it could never qualify as satisfactory, is what David Shatz has called "the free use doctrine." In short, this view holds that "the free use of empirical data about the formation of belief is unproblematic."¹⁶ To Stroud, and many others, allowing the "free use" of scientific or sense data is puzzling since it would appear to beg the question against the very data that modern scepticism puts into question.

Quine motivates this part of his view by recognizing first the so-called argument from despair. "The old epistemology," Quine tells us, "aspired to [...] construct [natural science] from sense data."¹⁷ Hume showed how spectacular a failure that project really is, although many epistemologists have tried to breath life into this "old" project ever since. So Quine asks innocuous-sounding questions like "Why not psychology?" and fleshes that proposal out by suggesting that "[e]pistemology in its new setting, [...] is contained in natural science, as a chapter of psychology."¹⁸ Quine defends his proposal against the

charge of circularity, not by denying that his project is circular, but rather, by rejecting the validity of circularity as a criticism against a suitably naturalized project. In other words, he denies that charges of question-begging circularity matter, if one's goal is not to legitimate the entire project. He explains his rationale in this famous passage:

Such a surrender of the epistemological burden to psychology is a move that was disallowed in earlier times as circular reasoning. If the epistemologist's goal is validation of the grounds of empirical science, he defeats his purpose by using psychology or other empirical science in the validation. However, such scruples against circularity have little point once we have stopped dreaming of deducing science from observations. If we are simply out to understand the link between observation and science, we are well advised to use any available information, including that provided by the very science whose link with observation we are seeking to understand.¹⁹

First, notice, that if this re-description is accepted, epistemology undergoes a significant revision of its goal and aspiration, if not a complete overhaul of its self-image. As Williams is fond of reminding us, in a contextualized view of inquiry, there is nothing constitutive of an inquiry beyond the context-bound and interest-relative features that give it shape. So if epistemology was traditionally concerned with validating the move from sense experience to belief in external, mind independent objects, then it would seem as though Quine's project is radically discontinuous with the questions that haunt Stroud.

Second, in order to encourage the adoption of the new project, we are asked to drop the stricture against circularity. Avoiding circularity, however, has been valued in theory construction since antiquity. Recall that Hume argued that since there could be no non-circular rational justification of induction, there could be no philosophically satisfying justification at all. The fear is that numerous, even conflicting, theories could be defended if they are granted the circular argument structure they rely on.²⁰ This new

development, it seems, strikes a revisionary blow at the core of traditional epistemology. Quine disagrees. He contends that “[...] it may be more useful to say rather that epistemology still goes on, though in a new setting and a clarified status.” This is to say, that on Quine’s view we can radically revise the traditional goal of epistemology and still recognize some characteristically philosophical questions remaining. However, as Stroud would emphasize, this puts Quine’s naturalizing project in an awkward position. If Quine is effectively pursuing a radically different project from the goal of traditional epistemology, then whatever his results, he will be talking past the traditional concerns of the epistemologist and sceptic. On the other hand, if Quine stresses the continuity with the traditional project, his aim of naturalization will indeed be a direct question-begging response, since it will invoke some version of the epistemic priority of sensory experience over knowledge of the world. Consider Quine’s further comments about the “new setting” of epistemology:

The relation between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for somewhat the same reasons that always prompted epistemology; namely, in order to see how evidence relates to theory, and in what ways one’s theory of nature transcends any available evidence.²¹

Unfortunately for his project, just in so far as this new “enlightened” project is discontinuous with traditional epistemology, it will be deemed unsatisfactory as an answer to the old question. Equally, talk of “meager input” and the consequent “torrential output,” or the “ways one theory of nature transcends any available evidence” evokes a gap quite similar with the epistemic priority gap. Although Quine stresses that this naturalized epistemology will be concerned with a causal account, and can therefore

sidestep the thorny issue of how to infer our theory of the world from our sense experience, he opens up a similar gap between evidence and theory. In Stroud's words,

Quine's project of naturalized epistemology has the interest and the apparent connection with traditional epistemology that it has only because it contains and depends on just such a bi-partite conception of human knowledge of the world. That is what [...] cannot succeed in explaining how knowledge is possible. But without that conception, 'naturalized epistemology,' as Quine describes it would be nothing but the causal explanation of various physiological events.²²

So Stroud's critique of naturalized epistemology ultimately centers on a clarification of self-images: Quine considers his naturalizing project to represent "enlightened persistence [...] in the original epistemological problem."²³ Stroud insists that whatever value Quine's causal-descriptive pursuits may hold, his "remarks do not answer or even address themselves to the philosophical problem of the external world."²⁴ If Quine's best argument for his naturalization project was merely that by dropping the hope of validating or legitimating the connection between sense perception and the supposed external world, we can dodge the charge of circularity despite our free use of empirical science to counter scepticism, then his case would indeed fall on one side of Stroud's complaint. That is, naturalized epistemology would either persist in the traditional aim of validation on pain of circularity, or it would revise the traditional aim of validation and thus fail to address the old problem at all. This may be an accurate account of Quine's original defense in "Epistemology Naturalized."

However, Quine later revised his defense of the free use doctrine in *The Roots of Reference*. There he opens his account with the easily recognizable traditional question: "Given only the evidence of our senses, how do we arrive at our theory of the world?"²⁵ This is the problem keyed on by Stroud and Williams as the epistemic priority of sensory

experience over knowledge of the external world. No one, at this point, could accuse Quine of attempting a “gratuitous change of subject matter.”²⁶ He sets himself the traditional question, and then addresses the troubling issue of circularity, which Stroud had framed so acutely as the choice between failure and irrelevance: “This fear of circularity,” Quine now tells us,

is a case of needless logical timidity, even granted the project of substantiating our knowledge of the external world. The crucial logical point is that the epistemologist is confronting a challenge to natural science that arises from within natural science.²⁷

To begin, I would challenge Quine’s diminutive assessment of the problem of circularity as “needless logical timidity.” To drop such a basic formal criteria of satisfaction would have drastic ramifications for the self-image of epistemology. In this sense, logical “timidity” is far from “needless;” to the contrary, it is required to retain a connection to the traditional project. Beyond this conceptual point, there is also an enhanced defense for the free use of empirical data: non-sceptics are allowed to appeal to scientific data because sceptics require the same assumption to get their case off the ground.

The argument goes as follows: In order to recognize the gap between ‘appearances’ and ‘reality’ or ‘internal representations’ and ‘external objects,’ scepticism relies on various “arguments from illusion.” These arguments are well-known, and are discussed by Descartes and Hume, as well Sextus Empiricus and Plato. One famous example is the appearance of a straight stick submerged in water. From certain angles, the stick appears bent, although we contend that when the stick is removed, it is and always was straight. Similarly, there is the case of how an object appears from a distance, as opposed to when viewed up close. There is also the case of mirages. The similarity in

these arguments is that they rely on differences in perceptual perspectives. Quine wants to stress that being aware of the difference in appearances of objects is itself the result of scientific discoveries. "It was science itself," he maintains, "[...] that demonstrated the limitedness of the evidence for science."²⁸ As such, the non-sceptic is just as warranted in appealing to empirical science to defend knowledge, as sceptics are in denying the possibility of knowledge. Once we recognize "that the skeptical challenge springs from science itself" we can deny that we are begging the question when "in coping with [scepticism] we [...] use scientific knowledge."²⁹ Stroud's likely response to this would be that in order to deliver a "satisfactory" positive account, neither side should be allowed to transgress the stricture against circular reasoning. Relying on a "tu quoque" justification may partially extricate one's own view (at least relative to other theories), but it hardly makes a positive stride toward satisfying the goal of finding a theory that satisfies all of the various criteria of satisfaction. That certain sceptical arguments ostensibly rely on what we recognize as scientific discoveries fails to accomplish what Stroud sees as the basic task of the traditional epistemologist: to provide a general account of how knowledge is possible. Freely using empirical data, since some sceptical arguments make use of similar data, does not divorce Quine's project from the fatal acknowledgement that the external world we "posit" (Quine's term) is radically underdetermined by the evidence we could ever adduce for it. In 4.3, I will explore a more radical sceptical problem, which escapes Quine's generalization that "the basis of scepticism is the awareness of illusion."³⁰

From the characterization of externalism above, it is evident that there is an externalist element in Quine's proposal. Motivation for externalist theories of knowledge and justification goes something like this: Internal constraints on knowledge attributions have repeatedly proven to lead to failure or circularity. This was evident with Descartes' internalist, first-person view of justification, and the problem has plagued epistemology ever since. Before examining Descartes' case in greater detail, it will help to review an account, like Ernest Sosa's, which is self-consciously externalist. Ernest Sosa attributes to Stroud a "metaepistemic requirement" (similar to what I have called metaphilosophical criteria of satisfaction) to the effect that "In order to understand one's knowledge satisfactorily one must see oneself as having some reason to accept a theory that one can recognize would explain one's knowledge if it were true."³¹ Sosa thinks this requirement is broadly "anti-externalist" (or pro-internalist), and he takes this to be symptomatic of "a deeply held intuition that underlies a certain way of thinking about epistemology," namely that "what is important in epistemology is justification."³² I would agree with this assessment, but add that Stroud (and many others) would see this as *constitutive* of the modern enterprise. Sosa adds that scepticism probably becomes unavoidable if one adds to this demand for internal justification, a further stricture against circularity. This much seems obvious. Certainly Descartes' apparatus of clear and distinct perceptions and the existence of a benevolent God were intended to give reasons why scepticism is not a permanent threat. Further, Descartes' attempt to use the existence of a benevolent God to validate clear and distinct perceptions, the veridicality of which are required to establish God's existence has long been accused of unacceptable circularity.³³ What is unclear is

how Sosa hopes to oppose such a characteristic and seemingly constitutive assumption within the traditional project, without facing the accusation that he is merely changing the goal of traditional epistemology, or violating another metaphilosophical criterion of satisfaction in an attempt to save the traditional project. I think Sosa is actually guilty of both charges.

I agree with Stroud that whatever value an externalist account may have, (that is, one that is unconcerned with having to justify the purported connection between the veridicality of beliefs and how we can be sure of that connection), it will never satisfy our desire to answer the general question of understanding how all of our knowledge is possible. More damaging to Sosa's claim to be able to provide a satisfactory non-sceptical, externalist account is that he sacrifices another cherished criterion of satisfaction—the stricture against circularity in constructing an adequate theory. Sosa champions a reliabilist view, which means that a demand for justification can be met only with reference to the propriety of a given belief-forming mechanism. Consider Sosa's schematization of such a view, where W stands for an appropriately reliable Way of forming beliefs:

- a) W is reliable (and suppose even that, given our circumstances and fundamental nature, it is the *most* reliable overall way we could have).
- b) We are *right* in our description of W: it is exactly W that we use in forming beliefs, and it is of course (therefore) W that we use in forming that belief that W is our way of forming beliefs.
- c) We *believe* that W is reliable (correctly so, given a above), and this belief, too is formed by means of W.³⁴

Sosa then asks: "What could possibly be missing?" Notice what reliabilism *does* require to attribute knowledge: That W is reliable (in other words, that W is *truly* a reliable

method), and that we *believe* it to be so. So on the traditional tri-partite analysis of knowledge, what is missing (or offered in a significantly modified way) is the demand for justification in addition to having a true belief.

Troubling questions arise: (1) Are you not assuming (in an obviously circular way) the reliability of W in order to justify the adoption of the belief that your particular W is reliable? (2) If that is what counts as justification couldn't we end up with numerous, even conflicting, yet coherent "reliable" ways, that nonetheless justify different beliefs? Sosa responds to both of these concerns. Regarding circularity, he grants that concerning the adoption of a particular, reliable belief forming method:

[a] correct and full response to rational pressure for disclosure of what justifies one in upholding the premises must circle back down to the truth of the conclusion. *Necessarily*, such an argument must be epistemically circular—that much seems clear enough. To rue that fact at this stage is hence like pining for a patron saint of modesty (who blesses all and only those who do not bless themselves), once we have seen that there could not possibly be such a saint.³⁵

There are two points I want to emphasize here. First, we should be very careful when promoting claims of necessary circularity in our ability to justify non-sceptical theories of knowledge, at least in so far as we are concerned about upholding the traditional self-image of philosophy as committed to the formal criteria of satisfaction discussed above. "Tu quoque" justifications are not straightforwardly successful; they only point out that all competing theories suffer the same defect. Second, based on this apparent inherent circularity in theories of knowledge, Sosa resists acknowledging Stroud's final route to dissatisfaction: the claim that we could never come to terms with our inability to supply what the traditional project demands as satisfactory, since it seems like a perfectly intelligible goal. Sosa's detection of necessary circularity in internalist theories seems

equally applicable regarding the externalist's decision to reject the internalist demand for wholesale legitimating justification. How could one possibly justify in a non-circular way the rejection of what Sosa refers to as Stroud's (and many other epistemologist's) "anti-externalist" "metaepistemic requirement"? Consider this passage from Williams:

[...] it looks as though there could not possibly be non-question-begging reasons for acceding to the key presupposition of the traditional project of assessing our knowledge of the world as a whole: namely, that propositions about physical objects belong intrinsically or naturally to a different epistemological category from those about appearances or "sense data." [...] [T]he appeal to the totality condition, as a way of establishing the necessary epistemological asymmetry, is *equally question-begging*. The traditional epistemologist's charge that the contextualist begs the question can be met with the reply that the boot is on the other foot.³⁶

Again, instead of a rigorous argument, we find a "tu quoque" accusation that whatever problem theory x has, all other epistemological theories will face as well. Are we in a position where we are forced to say (with mock-religious righteousness), 'Let he or she who philosophizes not in a circle cast the first charge of question-begging?' This is what externalists—who want to drop the traditional "bias" toward wholesale justification—seem to suggest. We have seen that attempts to naturalize epistemology also rely on dropping what Quine calls the "doctrinal" question of how we might justify our theory of the world based on sensory data. Sosa suggests that this is a "discomfort" that must be endured. An account of reliable belief formation is the best we can possibly hope for.

Stroud offers an ingenious comparison to counter whatever sympathy one might feel with externalist epistemologies that are broadly reliabilist. The aim of the thought experiment is to force us to recognize the additional assumptions we import into the

adjudication of externalist accounts, in order to support an admittedly circular reliabilist account like Sosa's, but still condemn Descartes' project. He sets up the thought experiment in this way:³⁷

I have in mind a fictional 'externalist' whom I shall call 'Descartes.' The theory of knowledge of the world that he accepts says that there is a beneficent, omnipotent, and omniscient God who guarantees that whatever human beings carefully and clearly and distinctly perceive to be true is true. The real Rene Descartes held a closely similar theory, but he tried to prove demonstratively that it was true. He was accused of arguing in a circle. My 'externalist' Descartes offers no proofs.³⁸

Taking this 'externalist' Descartes to hold a reliabilist theory, Stroud wants to learn from what he suspects will be a very different reaction to the Cartesian theory as opposed to Sosa's. It is not that Stroud wants to defend Descartes against an unfair dismissal. Rather, with this parallel in mind, we realize that what Sosa wants us to accept as a reliabilist, externalist account, is of equal weight and value as Descartes'. According to Stroud, we are likely to dismiss Descartes' account of how we reliably form true beliefs, for reasons that indict Sosa's account in the exact same way as the fictional externalist Descartes.

Since externalists reject the demand for giving separate justification for the truth of their favoured reliable belief-forming mechanism (on pain of circularity or infinite regress), one is left with a conditional position, which Stroud insists is evidently unsatisfactory. In other words, multiple valid conditional arguments can be constructed, without any hope of assessing their soundness. Both Sosa and the imagined externalist Descartes thus arrive at "a similarly true conditional verdict about his [own] position."³⁹ However, their theories are opposed on the issue of which reliable way their beliefs are formed. Independent support for either position cannot be summoned. Stroud argues that

any externalist theory will be left at this uncomfortable impasse: “If what I believe about my knowledge is true, I do understand it; if it is not, I do not. I think I do, but I wonder whether I understand my knowledge or not?”⁴⁰ This is where the poverty of externalism is revealed. Since reasons are not marshalled to substantiate (on independent grounds) the reasons for accepting the favoured reliable way, except for the “self-supporting” (Sosa’s term) reason that the belief about the theory is formed in the very way that the theory advocates, we are left with multiple, conflicting theories of reliable-belief forming mechanisms. Any attempt at wholesale justification of the view would lead back to an internalist attempt to legitimate, and Sosa admits, such attempts are doomed to infinite regress or circularity. Externalism overcomes the threat of circularity only by rejecting the traditional demand for providing reasons for how one knows that he or she knows anything at all. Taking this route, the regress will never get started, nor will the danger of circularity present itself. However, the lingering question will remain: Have we dropped the internalist demand for a legitimating account as an ad hoc evasion of the most troubling problem of traditional epistemology?

One of the examples of intuition-driven conditions of intellectual satisfaction discussed in Chapter 3 is that a positive account of knowledge must not appear to be an ad hoc construction devised solely to sidestep scepticism. Now one might reasonably object that the stricture against an anti-sceptical epistemology appearing ad hoc is misguided. For many would argue that the project of epistemology, if not derived solely from the need to ‘combat’ the threat of scepticism, has at least been accelerated and considerably shaped by the concern about scepticism. So if the roots or motivation to

construct a general theory of knowledge in the first place arises from the felt-need to block scepticism, it is hardly a solid criticism of positive epistemologies to split hairs over how detailed and subtle the defense should be. I think it should be stressed that there is certainly a danger for imbalance in a debate where both sides (sceptical and anti-sceptical) are both represented by philosophers of the same basic persuasion (i.e. those who think positive epistemology *is* or even *must* be possible). As a result, the opposing side, scepticism—which arguably does not even exist in some of the forms it is imagined to—is only represented through the constructions of hostile, positive epistemologists. As Anthony Rudd points out, it is misleading to argue for what “the sceptic [...] really means, or what the sceptic wants to deny” since there are very few actual proponents of scepticism, and sceptical positions are “usually a fiction created, in order to be refuted, by a nonsceptic.”⁴¹ So this is another reason to discount the objection that responses to scepticism should not appear ad hoc. Insofar as scepticism itself is a foil invoked by proponents of positive epistemologies, it should seem allowable that anti-sceptical epistemological construction may retain some air of artificiality.

If proponents of positive epistemologies are allowed to tweak aspects of the sceptical challenge to provide an impetus to construct more subtle and complex anti-sceptical epistemologies, an ad hoc refutation of scepticism does not seem any more artificial than the initial introduction of sceptical challenges. In fact, it seems like the anti-sceptical response may appear just as ad hoc as the subtlety of the proposed sceptical challenge invites or demands. However, it seems constitutive of the traditional self-image of epistemology that inquiry is aimed at something more rigorous and pure than

defending a particular view against all comers. Avoiding the appearance of ad hoc constructions is a central concern of Michael Williams. He fears that the rhetorical advantage gained by viewing scepticism as a natural or intuitive conclusion to any philosophical reflection on knowledge will only be reinforced by overly complex refutations. However, even with doubts about the propriety of assessing or defending against charges of ad hoc-ness, Stroud's point about the "ineliminable dissatisfaction" involved in externalist theories is clear: By dropping the traditional "internalist" demand for justifying reasons, we are led not to a more satisfying epistemology, but to a related dissatisfaction: the inability to judge between similarly supported reliable ways of forming beliefs that cannot get beyond the strength of conditional acceptance. Stroud does not dispute that many contemporary philosophers will be considerably more convinced by Sosa's or Alvin Goldman's⁴² scientific versions of reliabilism, than with Descartes' religious version; importantly, that tendency is not established by independent reasons of any kind.

Sosa claims that this is a "discomfort" we must "tolerate," since externalism represents the only possible outcome for epistemology, once we realize the inevitable disaster of traditional, internalist theories. The three possible outcomes of internalist views (bare assumption, infinite regress, or circularity) will be examined further in the next section. Sosa motivates his defense of externalism with an outline for what he calls "The Radical Argument" for scepticism. (Scepticism is taken here, as it is sometimes for Stroud, to be the view that we cannot have a satisfactory, fully general *theory* of

knowledge, not that we cannot in fact know anything at all about the world.) The argument goes as follows:

- A1. Any theory of knowledge must be internalist or externalist.
- A2. A fully general internalist theory is impossible.
- A3. A fully general externalist theory is impossible.
- C. From A1-A3, *philosophical scepticism* follows.⁴³

Sosa's strategy is to dispute premise A3. We have seen that Stroud's concerns about the lack of substantiation in externalist theories leads to a vindication of A3. Thus, Stroud is led back to his familiar position of denying that any philosophical theory of knowledge will provide the general satisfaction traditionally sought. Although Stroud disagrees with Sosa about deriving intellectual satisfaction by embracing externalism and dropping the stricture against circularity, he shares Sosa's "dark view of the times," by which he means a philosophical landscape strongly shaped by favorable estimations of scepticism, contextualism, and relativism.⁴⁴ Defending against these contemporary pariahs will not be achieved satisfactorily, Stroud contends, if we feel we have to drop the legitimating aim of epistemology, as Sosa's externalism requires, and then avoid scepticism only by ceasing to aim for the same kind of understanding.

On this point, we can compare Hume and Stroud on the issue of the naturalness or depth in human nature of the traditional epistemological demand. In Williams' words, "Hume sees human reason as fated to ask questions it cannot answer."⁴⁵ At his most pessimistic, Stroud would agree, in the sense that human beings are condemned to ask questions without the possibility of satisfactory answers. Although "fated" may seem like an inappropriate word, it is suitable at least to the extent that Stroud insists that the demand of traditional epistemology stems not only from the contingent history of our

tradition, but from a deeper source in human nature. As Williams notes: “Stroud’s most recent writings reveal an even deeper strain of pessimism. The lesson of scepticism, he now argues, is that [...] the kind of understanding that traditional epistemology tries to provide—is *forever beyond us*.”⁴⁶ As I argued in Chapter 3, this is hardly the depth of Stroud’s pessimism. For we could simply abandon the traditional epistemological project if it were merely misguided. The root of the problem for Stroud is that he is convinced that the kind of general understanding epistemology has traditionally sought is motivated by an “urge” that is deeply rooted not just in our tradition, but in our very nature.

Coming to see the impasse in the contemporary debate about scepticism, as the problem of substantiating conditional arguments, and negotiating the revision of various criteria of satisfaction, can lead us to wonder about the self-image of epistemology in general. With the likes of Quine and Sosa conceding that scepticism can only be overcome at the cost of accepting circularity at a fundamental level, we might ask: Has the encounter with scepticism forced us to reconfigure not only some of our intuition-driven criteria of satisfaction, but also some deep-seated criteria of theoretical-adequacy? If we dispute, and subsequently revise or abandon, even central criteria for judging satisfactory arguments, we may have to face that external world scepticism may be overcome only at the cost of revising the self-image of philosophers as purveyors of a single investigation into the relationship between human knowledge and the world. If the ever more sophisticated means of avoiding scepticism in epistemology have led us to recognize an inherent circularity in any argument for or against scepticism, and in any attempt to maintain or modify our metaphilosophical standards of theoretical adequacy,

then we have landed ourselves in a more dire metaphilosophical epistemic position than philosophical scepticism taken as a result within epistemology ever threatened us with. We are moving closer to recognizing that every substantial philosophical program adheres to criteria of satisfaction that are not themselves justified on independent grounds. Whether one chooses to stay within the prescribed traditional boundaries of epistemology, or attempts instead to propose an alternative program, we become guilty of one of the sins epistemologists are so desperate to avoid: bare assumption, infinite regress, or circularity. This problem, which I will turn to next, is hardly novel.

4.3 The Old Face of Scepticism

Both Stroud and Williams bracket ancient scepticism, to varying degrees, from their main diagnoses. Stroud states at the outset of *Significance* that he will confine his discussion to the modern or Cartesian problem of external world scepticism (which he somewhat misleadingly tends to call “traditional” scepticism, despite his recognition of its modern origin). He confesses to not “doing justice to [the ancient sceptical] tradition,” and admits demurely that ancient scepticism is “a subject I wish I knew more about.”⁴⁷ Michael Williams, on the other hand, treats specific ancient topics, but only when they are deemed to shed light on his primary concern, which is also “scepticism in its modern or ‘Cartesian’ form.”⁴⁸ He concludes, wrongly I will argue, that “the ancient problem [...] has no particular connection with the modern problem of our knowledge of the external world.”⁴⁹ I will not argue that the scope or aim of one can be superimposed on the other. I am suggesting, rather, that one of the most troubling directions that the contemporary debate about external world scepticism has led, is the recognition of two more general

and fundamental sceptical problems about theory construction: the so-called problem of the criterion and Agrippa's trilemma. The hope of settling the question of the possibility of finding a satisfactory non-sceptical epistemology diminishes, since a close examination of what would be required to reach satisfaction shows a potentially insoluble metaphilosophical impasse.

In my treatment of the contemporary debate about scepticism, I have continually been led to recognize the metaphilosophical nature of the disagreements haunting epistemology. The impasse in the contemporary debate about scepticism takes off from the recognition that agreement, where it can be had, is only of a conditional nature. If the process(es) by which we form beliefs are reliable, then we can have knowledge; If we are limited to the data of our sense to reconstruct an independent, objective world, then we must concede scepticism; If Descartes is correct to suggest that the dream-possibility is a relevant alternative which must be overcome to have any knowledge at all, then we must concede scepticism; If the criteria of satisfaction imposed by the traditional epistemological project are accepted, then we will be left forever wanting an adequate theory of knowledge; If we cannot find specific arguments to convince us that the traditional epistemological project is incoherent or misconceived, then we will have to concede scepticism. And so on.

To substantiate a conditional argument requires a hypothesis or premise that is dialectically acceptable. The problem is whether we can first know that our criteria or method of distinguishing between true and false beliefs is correct, or whether we can begin with specific examples of things we know, from which we can derive our criteria

and method. Roderick Chisholm is one of the few contemporary philosophers to continually raise and explore this ancient ‘problem of the criterion.’ He formulates the problem by considering the following pairs of questions:

- A) What do we know? What is the extent of our knowledge?
- B) How are we to decide whether we know? What are the criteria of knowledge?⁵⁰

It should be clear that if we could confidently answer either A or B we would be in fine standing to assert that we both know particular things, and we are able to describe the method by which we discern between truth and falsity. We could move from an answer to A to an answer to B, or vice versa. Chisholm categorizes possible stances toward these questions into three positions: methodism, particularism, and scepticism. A “methodist,” in Chisholm’s sense, is someone who thinks we have an answer to B (from which we can work toward an answer to A.) Two examples of methodists, then, are Hume and Sosa.⁵¹ Hume appeals to his principle of empiricism to distinguish what will count as a possible item of knowledge. Sosa, and any other reliabilist, also invokes an answer to B (some reliable method of forming beliefs) to enable us to answer A. A “particularist,” of which Chisholm is one, holds rather that we are better equipped to answer A (from which we can deduce an answer to B). Moore is another example of a particularist, since he thought we should start out from common sense examples of what we all know, and judge various epistemologies accordingly. If one’s method for distinguishing knowledge from non-knowledge could not account for these common sense items, then so much the worse for that theory. Finally, a “skeptic” according to Chisholm, is someone who insists that since you cannot answer A without knowing B, and you cannot answer B without knowing A,

then the entire epistemological project cannot get started on pain of ineluctable circularity.

The point I want to emphasize is that the problem of the criterion is not just a problem for deciding between competing criteria of truth. Pitched at a more general level, it affects every instance where criteria of satisfaction are proposed (explicitly or implicitly) to check the adequacy of a theory. It is hard to imagine a philosophical issue where such criteria are not, at least implicitly, appealed to. For instance, we saw in Chapter 3 that with regard to formal, traditional, and intuition-driven criteria of satisfaction, various contemporary epistemologists are willing to reject certain criteria in favour of others. Stroud, who seems most adamant that we do not sacrifice any of the traditional, formal, or core intuition-driven criteria of satisfaction, is left perpetually dissatisfied. I noted that intuition-driven criteria of satisfaction may seem the most likely candidates for revision, but as will become clear below, the war over the possibility of a non-sceptical epistemology is not likely to be won on the intuition battlefield.

Chisholm offers a complex hierarchy of epistemic terms in order to attempt what he calls a “kind of answer” to the problem. It is not relevant for our purposes to explore this in detail, since what matters is that he ultimately recognizes that whatever little “progress” he allegedly makes, he cannot provide a full-fledged satisfactory “solution.” On Chisholm’s view, the problem of the criterion is “insoluble.”⁵² Consider how he sums up the modicum of success he has achieved:

But in all of this I have presupposed the approach I have called “particularism.” The “methodist” and the “skeptic” will tell us that we have started in the wrong place. If now we try to reason with them, I am afraid, we will be back on the wheel.

What few philosophers have had the courage to recognize is this: we can deal with the problem only by begging the question.⁵³

If Chisholm is correct in this assessment, then it would seem that scepticism rules the day after all. Scepticism, taken in his sense of holding that neither A nor B can be addressed without presupposing an answer to the other, would seem to triumph at the meta-level. His response to this suggestion is that this is not so, since the sceptic's "view is only one of the three possibilities and in itself has no more to recommend it than the others do." I think he is mistaken in counting scepticism as a response on par with methodism and particularism, because scepticism seems to arise as a meta-position only on the recognition of the failure of both of the direct responses.

Chisholm completes this "defence" with another obvious instance of question-begging: "And in favour of our approach [particularism] there is the fact that we *do* know many things, after all."⁵⁴ David Kaplan is among many commentators who have puzzled over this aspect of Chisholm's "kind of answer": "Chisholm anticipates the charge that, by favoring his stipulation over the skeptic's, he begs the question against the skeptic in an arbitrary way. And disarmingly enough, he pleads guilty."⁵⁵ As I suggested with regard to Sosa's externalism, which embraces the necessary discomfort of a fundamental circularity at work in his reliabilist view, rejecting a deeply-rooted criteria of satisfaction (especially if it is formal or traditional) will not be dialectically effective.⁵⁶ Fellow epistemologists have at least as much right to insist on the stricture against circularity, as Sosa has to deny its relevance. In this way, we are pushed to see the metaphilosophical relevance of the problem of the criterion for the impasse created in the contemporary debate about scepticism when the focus shifts to the criteria of theoretical adequacy.

What Kaplan finds so “disarming,” many others would find alarming. Chisholm seems to share with Sosa (regarding reliabilism), and Quine (regarding naturalism), a comfortability with a “tu quoque” defense concerning circularity. Such a defense basically says, every theory will suffer this defect, so it should not count against my own (or any other for that matter). As Kaplan puts it, “[Chisholm’s] only defense is that his stipulation is no more arbitrary than any other one might choose.”⁵⁷ If the level of sophistication in contemporary epistemological debates keeps leading major figures to have to recognize the inherent circularity in their proposals for non-sceptical theories of knowledge, it is becoming more clear why the traditional epistemological enterprise has come under suspicion.

The reader may object that in order to substantiate a conditional claim, there are surely other justificatory methods that are not circular or question-begging. This leads us to another ancient sceptical consideration. Of the “Five Modes” attributed to the ancient sceptic Agrippa, three of them function sceptically in what Williams’ has called “Agrippa’s trilemma.”⁵⁸ The five modes taken together are the modes of: Dispute (or discrepancy), Infinite Regress, Relativity, Hypothesis, and Reciprocity (or circularity). Dispute and relativity do not feature in the trilemma, although they are important generally for motivating the ancient sceptical aim of suspension of belief (*epochē*). The mode from dispute or discrepancy suggests simply that since any given object of knowledge (or proposition, or in the case I am trying to make, criteria of satisfaction) is or could easily be disputed among philosophers or ordinary people, we should be led to suspend judgment. Similarly, the mode of relativity simply reminds us that any judgment

is relative to a perceiver, and thus cannot hope to touch reality, but must rest content with appearances. Trying to get on the privileged side of the knowledge/opinion divide has captivated epistemologists at least since this fundamental quest was entrenched in Plato's *Theaetetus*.

Williams explains the Agrippan strategy as “devastatingly simple.” We have three and only three ways of responding when a knowledge claim (or a proposed criteria of satisfaction) is challenged:

- 1) Refuse to respond, i.e. make an undefended assumption. [Mode of Hypothesis]
- 2) Repeat a claim made earlier in the argument, i.e. reason in a circle. [Mode of Reciprocity]
- 3) Keep trying to think of something new to say, i.e. embark on an infinite regress. [Mode of Infinite Regress]⁵⁹

Unless we can discover a response that does not fall afoul of these patterns, we should be led, according to ancient sceptics, to suspend judgment on the matter at hand. For our purposes, if we cannot find a metaphilosophical justification free of these defects, for any given criteria of satisfaction, we will be left in the uncomfortable position of having to recognize a fundamental flaw in our philosophical method. We will be guilty of begging the question, or embarking on an infinite regress, or arguing about coherent circles that may or may not be justified outside of their coherence. If this is the case, the self-image and nature of philosophy, as it has been traditionally understood, is definitely susceptible to revision, and perhaps, abandonment.

Hankinson refers to the above three modes as “prohibitions on certain types of reasoning.”⁶⁰ More specifically, they “appeal to fallacies codified in the Aristotelian tradition.”⁶¹ So here we find what I have been calling criteria of argumentative and

theoretical adequacy which are both formal and traditional. (As to whether they should also count as intuition-driven will be discussed below). It is also apparent why Stroud's complaint of inevitable dissatisfaction may be more plausible than the case he makes for it. In Chapter 3, I argued that a primary weakness in Stroud's overall view is that he insists on adhering to a very traditional picture of the epistemological enterprise. However, Williams, who purports to make a radical break with that traditional picture, must still admit that (a) the traditional project of trying to justify our belief in the external world based on sense experience (empiricism) is a failure, and that (b) no contextualization of knowledge and justification can reach the aim of wholesale legitimation. Williams may reverse the view that epistemological justification deserves the status of passing judgment on ordinary knowledge claims, but dismantling the traditional hierarchy will undoubtedly have massive ramifications for the self-image of epistemology. So perhaps the recent "end or transformation" debate within epistemology does not lack motivation after all.

We are now in a better position to understand why Chisholm affords such a prominent role within epistemology for the problem of the criterion. In addition to recognizing that it is "one of the most difficult of all problems of philosophy," he is "tempted to say that one has not begun to philosophize until one has faced this problem and has recognized how unappealing, in the end, each one of the possible solutions is."⁶² If epistemologists are to allow "tu quoque" accusations to revise traditional constraints on theory construction, then the effects of the contemporary scepticism debate will be significant and widespread indeed. I suggested in Chapter 1 that despite appearances, the

aim and value of this study of scepticism would not lie in the narrow domain of the contemporary debate over scepticism. One of the weaknesses of evaluating sceptical problems merely with reference to the “problem of the external world” is that, following Hume, even philosophers most convinced that for some reason (dream argument, argument from illusion, argument from error, etc.) we cannot “know” that what appears to be an external world around us exists, concede that it would be impossible to function if one held to that view. Some, in the common sense tradition (G.E. Moore, and more recently, Roderick Chisholm) have even suggested that we should start with the fact that we do know some things, and use that fundamental fact as a criterion by which to dismiss theories that fail to do that fact justice. Common sense philosophers are also most likely to try to appeal to the “human” side of philosophers, and soften them up with along the informal lines of “C’mon, you don’t really doubt the existence of an external world. No one does. Let’s give the edge (by way of presumption) to positive epistemologies.” In this way, Chisholm tries to sway the reader by suggesting that it is only by adopting a non-sceptical position that “we can make *some* progress toward answering the traditional questions of epistemology,” and that ultimately this “work[s] out in a much more satisfactory way.”⁶³ Of course, based on the case I have been mounting, Chisholm’s claim to “satisfaction” is blocked. A dialectically agreeable, and hence effective, agreement is out of the question. He admits that his account begs the question against scepticism, and considering the Agrippan problem of justifying any criteria of satisfaction, scepticism will seem to follow on a meta-level. Once the situation is recognized to be as I have attempted to present it here, it is hard to deny that there are

fundamental problems with the traditional picture of not only what epistemology is but also what it can be. Two equally unseemly possibilities exist: First, there is a nagging sense, on the one hand, that attempts to offer a radically different account of the aspirations and demand of epistemology may be unduly revisionary; on the other, without radically altering the accepted criteria of satisfaction, even non-sceptical epistemologists have come to agree that scepticism follows.

Now where does this study fit in with the philosophical discussion it criticizes—even while necessarily participating in the conversation? It is commonplace that philosophers who attempt to radically criticize their own tradition, are left waiting for their successors to accuse them of not having extricated themselves sufficiently from the shared assumptions of their common ancestors. I am certainly not suggesting that I have attempted to criticize the current state of epistemology from some position external to it. On the contrary, my exploration of the problem grows out of a struggle to find my way around the received epistemological landscape. But because any claim to radically criticize the foundations of philosophy have come to be viewed with suspicion, it may be asked whether there is any room to move between the desire to be continuous with the tradition, and the need to break free of its constraints. I am not claiming to have ‘discovered’ much of anything. I have merely tried to assemble a comprehensive case which can support the claim that the recent interest in scepticism is not anomalous in the wider discussion of the possibility of the “end or transformation” of epistemology.

In Chapter 1, I described the cluster of concerns that I take to be metaphilosophical to include the methodology, nature, aim, self-image and criteria of

satisfaction of doing philosophy. Morris Lazerowitz, who is actually credited with coining the term “metaphilosophy,”⁶⁴ connects my sense of metaphilosophy as a general investigation into the methods, aim, and self-image of philosophy, with what I have found to be the upshot of such an investigation: “Metaphilosophy is the investigation of the nature of philosophy, with the central aim of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments.”⁶⁵ Put in Lazerowitz’s terms, I think the metaphilosophical root of “the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments” has to do with the underlying problems of the criterion and Agrippa’s trilemma.

Before turning to examine the role of intuitions in contemporary epistemology, and connecting this discussion to the “end or transformation” debate of the past few decades, I want to introduce Robert Fogelin’s perspective. More than any other contemporary epistemologist, Fogelin is concerned with the force of ancient (Pyrrhonian and Agrippan) scepticism. His orientation is evident from the following:

[...] I will define the philosophical problem of epistemic justification as the attempt to [...] meet the skeptical challenge presented by Agrippa’s Five Modes Leading to the Suspension of belief. [...] In recent literature, what I am calling the Agrippa problem is often referred to as the infinite regress problem. I find this characterization too narrow, for the problem that presents itself is not simply that of avoiding a bad infinite regress; the challenge is to avoid this regress without falling into a bad form of circularity or a bad form of unjustified acceptance.⁶⁶

Notice three things. (1) Fogelin affords the Agrippa problem centrality within the epistemological debate over justification and legitimation; (2) He is aware that the full force of the trilemma can only be felt if we avoid emphasizing one horn (infinite regress, or circularity) to the neglect of the others. It is only as a result of the interaction of the

Modes that metaphilosophical scepticism follows; (3) He imports the adjective “bad” before infinite regress, circularity, and unjustified acceptance. This final point is noteworthy, since it seems to suggest that there might be acceptable forms of these approaches to reasoning. If that were so, we might have found a way out of this sceptical situation. Unfortunately, any attempt to distinguish between “bad forms” and acceptable forms of regress, circularity, and unjustified acceptance will lead us back to face squarely the problem of the criterion.

Although Fogelin seems more aware of these ancient problems than almost all of his contemporaries, he fails to see how they would affect even the criteria of satisfaction used to adjudicate what should count as a successful epistemology. After introducing the Agrippa problem, he suggests that prior to “an examination of these competing justificationalist theories, it will be useful to set down minimal success conditions that we can apply evenhandedly to all of them.”⁶⁷ The three candidates he offers to act as “success conditions” are: (1) that “the author should specify, as desiderata, just which beliefs she takes to be justified, and which not [...]”; (2) “that the theory show in some detail just how these same beliefs are justified”; (3) “an answer to the Agrippa problem may not beg the question by assuming *for argumentative purposes* that there *must* be some positive solution to it. To motivate the adoption of these three “success conditions,” Fogelin states that “they strike [him] as being altogether reasonable.”⁶⁸ But, of course, striking a particular epistemologist as “being altogether reasonable” is hardly going to lead to widespread adoption. Trying to reach agreement on these “success conditions,” or criteria of satisfaction, will lead us straight back to the Agrippan problem. At least

Fogelin satisfies condition (1), which he calls “*philosophical candor*,”⁶⁹ by clearly stating what he would count as satisfaction. Although settling on his particular conditions will not be any easier, the process of coming to recognize the metaphilosophical nature of conflicting criteria of satisfaction could be sped up, if epistemologists began to “specify” with “candor” just what beliefs or criteria they are trying to protect.

4.4 Business as Usual?

Although most epistemologists may not offer the complete disclosure that Fogelin requests, there is a sense in which most do explicitly appeal to one or more favoured beliefs, which they attempt to protect at all costs. In analytic epistemology, these are known as “intuitions.” Richard Miller explains their central role in contemporary epistemology this way: “The appeal [to an intuition] takes this form: What would you say if...? The structure is that of a hypothetical with some imagined situation in the antecedent and the reader’s linguistic response to that situation in the consequent.”⁷⁰ Christopher Gowans outlines the situation as follows: Although contemporary epistemology prides itself on rigorous argument, “it may seem surprising how often analytic philosophers use the word ‘intuition’, and how often, in the course of argument, they appeal to their, or ‘our’, intuitions about things.”⁷¹ Gowans recognizes that intuitions have this crucial role to play, since an “[a]rgument can only establish connections,” and asserting a starting point or substantiating a first premise becomes the difficult task. Since the methods used in the past, like asserting foundational, basic beliefs, or self-evident truths have been discredited, contemporary philosophers “have little choice but to declare their starting points on the basis of intuition.”⁷² This is the plight that I have outlined

above as the failure to get farther than an impasse between conflicting conditional arguments, some delivering sceptical conclusions, and others bringing positive epistemologies. Throughout this study I have self-consciously avoided relying on appeals to intuitions. The reason is that appealing to intuitions will suffer from the same limitations of more formal criteria of satisfaction: They are heterogeneous and not readily agreed upon. Intuitions clash, and supporting one over another will land an epistemologist in the desperate situation of trying to substantiate a criterion of acceptance. When challenged, Agrippa's trilemma will arise to stymie any attempt to provide independent grounds for accepting one intuition, rather than a competing one. The search for a dialectically acceptable starting point or set of criteria remains the problem.

A reliance on intuitions has long been a recognized mark of analytic epistemology. Recently, the role of intuitions has come under suspicion. I will begin by exploring the issues raised in Richard Miller's recent article "Without Intuitions." I will then connect his concerns with Rorty's treatment of intuitions in trying to envision a "post-Philosophical culture." On both views, pragmatic reasoning ultimately shapes the acceptance or rejection of intuitions, and by extension, the value of theories and the direction of inquiry. To use Miller's slogan, overcoming the wreckage of traditional analytic epistemology involves the recognition that "Utility trumps intuition."⁷³ Before questioning the viability of this pragmatic direction, I will outline what it would mean to abandon the traditional view in favour of a revisionary outlook.

Without outlining the failures in detail, Miller seems antecedently convinced that traditional analytic philosophy should be abandoned. Despite the great promise of conceptual analysis, Miller argues, it has proven unfeasible. This is largely because, in practice, “philosophers disagreed not only about the implications, but about the correctness, of the analyses on which their premises depend.”⁷⁴ This is very similar to J.C.C. Smart’s concern voiced in Chapter 3, to the effect that philosophy always courts circularity, since “philosophers are willing to question everything, not only the premises of their arguments but the very canons of right reasoning and the methodology of argument.”⁷⁵ Miller does not think that the problem runs so deep as to threaten all possible successor kinds of epistemology.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Miller does not think naturalism is the proper area to develop instead. His hope is rather to begin to develop a “philosophical method which is rigorous, rational, and creative while being radically distinct from the methods of the empirical sciences.”⁷⁶ As a vision, this may sound like an interesting proposal, but even in its barest form, it retains problematic elements from traditional epistemology. For instance, what would it mean to be “rational,” apart from having to appeal to a standard or criterion of rationality? To justify any standard, even one appealing to utility, will involve the ancient problems of the criterion and Agrippa’s trilemma. Miller suggests that the new face of analytic philosophy should retain its emphasis on “clarity,” but at the same time “be boldly revisionary”⁷⁷ at the level of concept formation and acceptance. When Miller claims that he “believe[s] that it is possible to choose among significantly different versions of even the most basic concepts,”⁷⁸ I would agree, but hasten to add

that this is hardly a welcome solution to the fundamental problem facing epistemology. Rather, it is the source of the problem. For any proposed successor concept will face the same problems of the traditional ones. Furthermore, the revised concepts or criteria will face the prejudice of conflicting with, or contradicting the familiar understanding of the tradition.

It is time to consider what may be the most far-reaching consequences of coming to recognize the metaphilosophical scepticism about theory construction that lurks beneath the surface of the contemporary external world scepticism debate. I am suspicious of Williams' attempt to link all of our traditional problems to our reliance on assumptions of "epistemological realism." Even if epistemological realism lurks at the very bottom of our traditional epistemological project, we must distinguish between constitutive and non-constitutive aspects of that project. For it is one thing to diagnose the source of a philosophical problem as a point of theory; it is quite another to show how we could abandon such an element and still call our project the same. Williams' recent afterword to his revised doctoral dissertation, *Groundless Belief*, addresses the relation of his work on scepticism to the "end of epistemology" debate. There he admits that his early work trumpeted the "death of epistemology" in part due to "an over-simplified identification of the goal of epistemology with 'refuting the sceptic,'" and in part, because at that time he thought an alternate picture could be found "free of all theoretical commitments and thus problem-free."⁷⁹ As we saw in Chapter 3, Williams is now committed to the theory-laddenness of all attempts to carve up epistemology, but he considers the recognition of the various contexts created as sufficient to explode the

traditional account of the relationship between philosophical and ordinary knowing. The Cartesian-Humean legacy of viewing philosophical knowledge as privileged and ultimately able to sit in judgment of our ordinary sense of knowing, is discarded along with the epistemological realist assumption that some objective hierarchy exists, which fixes the relation between the worth of knowledge in different contexts.

Williams proudly claims to make “a cleaner break with the epistemological tradition than even its most radical critics have typically made.”⁸⁰ As I stressed in Chapter 3, it is important to note that although he sees contextualism as “offering a certain redrawing of the standard map of our conceptual terrain,”⁸¹ that this new configuration does not redeem the traditional epistemological enterprise. At best, he shows that we should not mistake the failure of traditional epistemology as the loss of our warrant to know across the board. In other words, global scepticism fails, but only because all inquiry is context-bound and interest-relative, and according to Williams, the idea of epistemology as a privileged, pure project of inquiry is misguided. Although his work bears a complex, and often openly critical relation to Richard Rorty’s views, Williams conclusions in *Unnatural* can be seen to open the door to Rorty’s concerns about pragmatism and conversationalism.

Soon after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty gave up his suggestion that hermeneutics might be a fruitful way to move past epistemological questions, and he adopted a neo-pragmatic orientation instead. In *Consequences of Pragmatism* Rorty envisions a “post-Philosophical culture” “in which the science/literature distinction would no longer matter.”⁸² He sees it as a time in the near future of Western culture when

the concerns of traditional Philosophy give way to pragmatist thinkers doing philosophy. The metaphilosophical aim of uncapitalized philosophy is not to capture some enduring truth about the essence of goodness or justice, but rather, following Wilfrid Sellars, “an attempt to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term.”⁸³ This modest and open-ended, if not vague and ambiguous, approach to philosophy faces “pragmatists” with a dilemma. For they are “trying to find ways of making antiphilosophical points in nonphilosophical language.” However, for this task, their language will either seem too revisionary or non-technical, and will be dismissed as “too ‘literary,’” or it will remain too traditional, and consequently “it will embody Platonic assumptions which will make it impossible for the pragmatist to state the conclusion he wants to reach.”⁸⁴ So Rorty is aware that merely changing the subject is not enough to convince traditionally-minded philosophers, who are content, or even adamant, to not only continue the conversation of the West, but to do so in the service of solving the perennial problems of Philosophy, such as freewill versus determinism or scepticism.

Rorty’s responds to those who see the traditional problems as worthy of our continued attention, with the question, “Why, insofar as we are gripped by these problems, do we see them as deep rather than as *reductiones ad absurdum* of a vocabulary?”⁸⁵ This dispute does not seem resolvable by any dialectically effective argument, since what is lacking are agreed upon starting points, shared intuitions, and criteria of satisfaction. Rorty recognizes that looking toward either intuitions or some criterion for distinguishing which issues might be profitably pursued versus those to be

abandoned will not resolve the fundamental metaphilosophical issue: “There is no way in which the issue between the pragmatist and his opponent can be tightened up and resolved according to criteria agreed to by both sides. This is one of those issues which puts everything up for grabs at once.”⁸⁶ With the proliferation of methods and criteria of satisfaction, the underlying problem is that *every major issue* within, say, epistemology, is “one of those issues which puts up everything for grabs at once.” That, as Smart suggests, is the “recipe for circularity” inherent in philosophical disagreements. With this in mind—and it seems that Rorty, and to a lesser extent Miller, are aware of this fundamental difficulty—how can pragmatism hope to overcome, or at least make sense of, this situation?

The pragmatic element of Miller’s approach counters what he thinks is a tendency to overemphasize the value of describing the contents of ordinary language. As Miller understands them, intuitions, to traditional description-minded philosophers, arise as “the personal epiphenomenal residue of public linguistic habits.”⁸⁷ In other words, traditional philosophers think there is something deep to be discovered by appealing to “our” intuitions, since they hold that we share these feelings as a result of our shared linguistic community. Moreover, Miller criticizes philosophers like Strawson and Stroud, for mistaking the central ideas of philosophy as being “timeless,” while they are merely “ancient.” More valuable, according to Miller, is a revisionary approach to philosophy that is willing to criticize long-standing “linguistic conventions” by openly proposing “stipulative definitions” in their stead.⁸⁸ The benefit of this approach is that it “requires only that definitions be evaluated not with respect to matching intuitions, but rather with

respect to their contribution to our pursuit of whatever those ends happen to be.”⁸⁹ However, this approach courts one of Agrippa’s traps: bare assumption or hypothesis. The justification of introducing or stipulating strict definitions, according to Miller, will be repaid by the utility of doing philosophy within such clear bounds. Since intuitions are not homogeneous (as one might suspect if they were really so closely tied to the shared linguistic practices of a community), on occasions when they do clash, the methods of description leave us no means of adjudication. “The solution,” Miller tells us, “is to ignore intuitions altogether.” He suggests instead that “[p]hilosophers should propose new concepts and evaluate them solely in terms of utility.”⁹⁰ Although Miller does not invoke Rorty by name, his seemingly radical proposal about intuitions and the necessity of allowing utility to be a guiding force will be familiar to readers of Rorty (especially his earlier work).

Although these pragmatic proposals seem to promise freedom from lingering, seemingly irresolvable traditional problems, they do so only at the cost of begging the question every bit as much as other approaches. Consider these comments put forth by Rorty, which both seem to recognize the problem and offer a pragmatic way out:

[A] There are no fast little arguments to show that there are no such things as intuitions—arguments which are themselves based on something stronger than intuitions.

[B] A traditional philosopher’s “dogmatism of intuitions is no worse, or better, than the pragmatist’s inability to give noncircular arguments.”

[C] “[T]he status of intuitions can be described either as a conflict of intuitions about the importance of intuitions, or as a preference for one vocabulary over another. [...] *the issue is one about whether philosophy should try to find neutral-starting points which are distinct from cultural traditions, or whether all philosophy should do is compare and contrast cultural traditions.*”⁹¹

[A] seems to concede the existence of what philosophers call intuitions, while setting up the “tu touque” defence of [B]. [C] again finds Rorty contrasting the view of traditional philosophers, who see everything as rooted in intuitions, with his own view that sees vocabularies as revisable and capable of abandonment. The criteria by which a vocabulary is retained or jettisoned is always a matter of human needs, or the purposes of a particular inquiry. Rorty denies that the existence of common intuitions should be equated with their value or their claim to be preserved. He suggests rather, as Miller does, that intuitions arise in a community of shared language users, but that this does not automatically translate into a mandate to retain them:

Of course we have such intuitions. How could we escape having them? We have been educated within an intellectual tradition built around such claims [...]. But it begs the question between pragmatist and realist to say that we must find a philosophical view which “captures” such intuitions. The pragmatist is urging that we do our best to *stop having* such intuitions, that we develop a *new* intellectual tradition.”⁹²

The fundamental problem with using a pragmatic criterion of concept acceptance or theoretical adequacy is that it assumes itself in the reasoning behind what counts as success or satisfaction. Rorty is prepared to accept the radical revision that would include a commitment to viewing criteria in pragmatic terms. “The really exasperating thing about literary intellectuals,” Rorty submits

from the point of view of those inclined to science or to Philosophy, is their inability to engage in [...] argumentation—to agree on what would count as resolving disputes, on the criteria to which all sides must appeal. In a post-Philosophical culture, this exasperation would not be felt. In such a culture, criteria would be seen as a pragmatist sees them—as temporary resting-places constructed for specific utilitarian ends.⁹³

Is there any reason why coming to see criteria as transitory, interest-relative “resting-places” is more likely to facilitate inquiry? Not really. Scepticism, after all, is usually a *challenge* made against an inquirer, with the purpose of eliciting their purported justification for claiming x, or carrying out the investigation as they do. Whether criteria are seen as atemporal rational touch stones or merely temporary, utilitarian methodological necessities required to accomplish a particular inquiry, nothing has been suggested on this pragmatic account to ensure, or even encourage, progress:

On the pragmatist account, a criterion (what follows from axioms, what the needle points to, what the statute says) is a criterion because some particular social practice needs to block the road of inquiry, halt the regress of interpretations, in order to get something done. So rigorous argumentation—the practice which is made possible by agreement on criteria, on stopping-places—is no more *generally* desirable than blocking the road of inquiry is generally desirable.⁹⁴

Stable criteria, even if only temporary, are prerequisites for any successful adjudication of a theory. This is exactly what was shown to be lacking in the contemporary debate about constructing a satisfactory non-sceptical epistemology in Chapter 3. If agreement could be had that a pragmatic criterion was acceptable, some form of inquiry would be possible. However, this inquiry, made possible by consensus would not resemble the kind of theory of knowledge that has traditionally been aimed at, i.e. an epistemology that could withstand the sceptical challenge. In other words, the general considerations canvassed in this chapter suggest that a sceptical challenge could be mounted just as easily against any attempt to justify this pragmatic criterion. Most importantly, shifting epistemology toward a primarily pragmatic orientation would amount to a significant revision of the self-image of epistemologists as purveyors of an inquiry into the general nature of knowledge. As the reception of Rorty’s devil-may-care revisionary

metaphilosophy can attest, G.K. Chesterton's pithy observation made at the dawn of the twentieth century still holds for many philosophers: "Pragmatism is a matter of needs, and one of the first of human needs is to be something more than a pragmatist."⁹⁵

It is hardly a vindication of traditional epistemology that philosophers of very different orientations (Chisholm, Sosa, Rorty, Quine, and Miller) are prone to invoke "tu quoque" justification of their own transgressions against formal or traditional criteria of satisfaction. If we must accept question-begging circularity, appeals to unjustified starting-points, or ad hoc evasions of sceptical challenges, in order to establish a non-sceptical theory of knowledge, then this should come with the explicit avowal of a fundamental revision of our understanding of epistemological inquiry. Of course, the theme of *Mirror* that raised the most eyebrows concerned the self-image of philosophy. Rorty's telling of the history of philosophy suggests that it was Kant who enshrined the self-image of "philosophy-as-epistemology," in part by making the enterprise seem like "a *foundational* discipline." Philosophy was claimed to be "primary" in the sense of "underlying" the project of other sciences. Embedding theory of knowledge in this way

[Kant] thus enabled philosophy professors to see themselves as presiding over a tribunal of pure reason, able to determine whether other disciplines were staying within the legal limits set by the "structure" of their subject matters.⁹⁶

A primary aim of *Mirror*, then, was to expose this self-image as historically conditioned and in need of revision—if not ultimately chimerical. I am not concerned to dispute or endorse Rorty's particular version of the historiography of epistemology's rise and fall. I want to stress only that the contested issue of scepticism within epistemology gains its contemporary urgency from its close relation to the self-image of philosophy

itself. The contemporary debate about external world scepticism bleeds into wider issues of epistemology and philosophy itself, since the debate exemplifies that arguments for or against scepticism rely on differing criteria of satisfaction, and in many cases, denying what seem like criteria of theoretical adequacy that are constitutive of our Western tradition.

Rorty is often chastised for what is taken to be his lack of reverence for the Western philosophical tradition. Joseph Margolis captures this common complaint about Rorty's style *and* substance: "Rorty's stand [...] looks like little more than a thumbing of his nose at those who continue to play at metaphysics and epistemology."⁹⁷ In *Consequences*, one finds numerous examples of this free-and-easy-sounding dismissive attitude: "So pragmatists see the Platonic tradition as having outlived its usefulness. [...] [T]hey do not think we should ask those questions anymore. [...] They would simply like to change the subject."⁹⁸ Although Rorty shows disdain for many of the so-called perennial problems of philosophy, it is misleading to suggest that he is in any way interested in rejecting the entire tradition that has inspired his view. To the contrary, his imperative is to continue the conversation, that is, to promote the call-and-answer pattern of dialectic that constitutes the tradition. This "conversationalism," as it has been called, has been attacked just as vehemently. Susan Haack, for instance, contends that "Rorty's theme of philosophy as 'just a kind of writing,' [or] as 'carrying on the conversation' of Western culture" would have "disastrous" consequences, the most dire of which would be the calling into question of "the possibility of inquiry" itself.⁹⁹

Although Rorty does not invoke the problem of the criterion or Agrippa's trilemma for this purpose, it is clear that "the possibility of inquiry" that he is accused of blocking *is* jeopardized by these ancient sceptical challenges. Inquiry that begins with a non-biased starting point, and is free of interest-relativity and pragmatic constraints would be barred on Rorty's view. "If the purposes you are engaged in fulfilling," Rorty tells us

can be specified pretty clearly in advance (e.g. finding out how an enzyme functions, preventing violence in the streets, proving theorems), then you *can* get it. If they are not (as in the search for a just society, the resolution of a moral dilemma, the choice of a symbol of ultimate concern, the quest for a "postmodernist" sensibility), then you probably cannot, and you should not try for it. If what you are interested in is *philosophy*, you *certainly* will not get it—for one of the things which the various vocabularies for describing things differ about is the purpose of describing things. The philosopher will not want to beg the question between these various descriptions in advance.¹⁰⁰

Notice that Rorty outlines in general what I have tried to show with specific reference to the contemporary debate about scepticism and epistemology. In order to adjudicate this (or any) debate, we will necessarily appeal to various criteria of satisfaction. In Chapter 3, I suggested a number of criteria at play in the contemporary debate, which I divided into formal, traditional, and intuition-driven categories. Although there is a great deal of conditional agreement to be had in the contemporary debate (e.g. *if* we start with Hume's principle of empiricism, then we will end in scepticism) neither sceptics, nor positive epistemologists are able to substantiate their case *to the satisfaction of each other*. This, I contend, is because there is disagreement at the fundamental level of what allegiance should be paid to particular criteria. As the ancient problem of the criterion suggests, sorting out this issue would require either knowing a particular true theory of knowledge

from which we could deduce a method, or knowing a method of correct belief formation from which to know which theories are correct. Chisholm adds that either of these strategies will eventually beg the question. Adding to this, Agrippa's trilemma, which can be set as a challenge to any particular starting point that is proposed as true, it becomes clear that agreeing on criteria of satisfaction—a prerequisite for carrying out the philosophical debate about scepticism within epistemology—could be forever beyond us.

One possible way out could be an appeal to intuitions; another could be revisionary pragmatism. As we saw above, both will inevitably face the same ancient difficulties, and hence, fail to be dialectically effective. And where fundamental disagreement among opposing philosophers is found, question-begging is soon to follow. Recall again the lingering threat of circularity that Smart suggests is courted by the very self-reflexiveness characteristic of philosophical positions:

one trouble with philosophy is that philosophers are willing to question everything, not only the premises of their arguments but the very canons of right reasoning and the methodology of argument. If this is not a recipe for circularity of argument and irresolvable dispute, what is?¹⁰¹

To extend Smart's metaphor slightly, the question is, can we cook up our epistemologies according to any other "recipe"? Or, would doing so alter our cuisine so drastically that many would complain that it has become, if not unpalatable for independent reasons, at least not worthy of spending much time in the kitchen?

Importing Smart's considerations into my analysis of the contemporary stalemate in the debate surrounding scepticism, what conclusions should we draw regarding the lack of knock-down arguments for or against the sceptical challenge? It seems clear that the volume of books and articles in recent decades on a traditional problem like external

world scepticism, is not out of line with the parallel discussion of the death of epistemology. Rather, a close examination of the stalemate in the debate about external world scepticism leads to the challenge of metaphilosophical scepticism. Perhaps it is only against the background of the traditional aims of philosophizing that having to give up the possibility of widespread consensus on fundamental philosophical issues seems so disconcerting. But it is not clear how philosophy even if conceived of with a very modest self-image, like Rorty's philosophy-as-conversation, deserves to claim much importance for itself. When consensus seems so fundamentally and intractably blocked, even on the most basic questions, we may wonder how Rorty can claim that although Western philosophy is just one conversation in the history of humankind that *it is good to talk*.

In this sense, Rorty is not really heralding the "end" or "death" of, say, epistemology. He just wants to encourage creativity in revising problematic concepts and inventing new vocabularies. Rorty continues, however, to herald the *conversational* nature of philosophical disputes, which he formulated in *Mirror* as "the only point on which [he] would insist": "that philosophers' moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West [...]." ¹⁰² It is important to note that Rorty is thoroughly revisionist in the sense I am using that term. What counts for him as "continuing the conversation," would be simply changing the subject to many others. Rorty's recent appointment at Stanford as a professor of comparative literature may serve as a smirking vindication for his critics who have always felt that his attempts to change the subject, and dismiss traditional problems, never amounted to anything more than a disregard for philosophy proper. Whatever Rorty has been up to, those critics would insist, it has not

been recognizably within the conversation of Western philosophy. Of course, Rorty's ready response is that the protectionism of perennial problems and traditional approaches amounts to nothing more than dogmatism. As such, he has been doomed to be dismissed as he complains Dewey and Derrida have been, simply on the charge of "not really doing philosophy." Once again, we face the seemingly moot confrontation between proponents of traditional and revisionary philosophy.

Although Rorty is taken to be a prime example of a "end of" or "death of" epistemology philosopher, he has never suggested that this revised understanding of philosophy would mean the end of professional philosophy. As he put it recently:

Talk of the "end of philosophy" is as easy, but as empty, as talk of the "end of the novel." [...] "[T]he death of the novel" means no more than "the death of a kind of novel." The same cynicism should be felt about announcements of "the end of philosophy" which typically means something like "the end of system-building" or "the end of empiricism" or "the end of Cartesianism."¹⁰³

While this serves to clarify Rorty's position somewhat, it does so at the cost of downplaying just how difficult a shift away from traditional modes of philosophy would be. The ostensible concern driving the contemporary debate about external world scepticism is that the project of full-scale epistemic justification may never satisfactorily be completed. Metaphilosophical scepticism, on the other hand, threatens to show that satisfaction, taken as unanimous, or at least, widespread agreement on core issues cannot be had, since the project of arguing for any given conclusion cannot get started.¹⁰⁴ The lack of not only criteria of concept acceptance and theoretical adequacy, but the inability to make a case for either that would not be deficient either since reliant on circular, infinitely regressive or assumptive reasoning, seems to point away from epistemology as

a unified discipline capable of resolving perennial problems, and toward the more modest proposals of those who are heralding a radical shift in the self-image of philosophy.

I have presented this as a problem for metaphilosophical study and reflection. Recall that Lazerowitz actually subsumes the existence of such problems preventing first-order philosophical agreement into his definition of the task of metaphilosophy: “Metaphilosophy is the investigation of the nature of philosophy, with the central aim of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments.”¹⁰⁵ Elsewhere he refers to “the special aim” of metaphilosophical investigation as the attempt to arrive at “a satisfactory understanding of what is in their [philosophical utterances] nature which permits the intractable disagreements which invariably attach to them.”¹⁰⁶ I have suggested that “the intractable disagreements” in the contemporary debate about external world scepticism are themselves the product of more fundamental metaphilosophical problems: lack of agreed upon criteria of satisfaction, and an inability to establish or argue for a favoured method or theory without inevitably transgressing against one or other standard criteria of theoretical adequacy: begging the question, relying on an undefended assumption, constructing an ad hoc defence, or any other of a number of ‘reasonable’ criteria.

What hope should he have of a brighter future for traditional epistemology? What would it take to break free from these old problems? Consider this diagnosis put forth by Rorty early in his career:

The history of philosophy is punctuated by revolts against the practices of previous philosophers and by attempts to transform philosophy into a science [...]. [Repeatedly] one finds the same disgust at the spectacle of philosophers

quarreling endlessly over the same issues. The proposed remedy for this situation typically consists in adopting a new method [...].

In the past, every such revolution has failed, and always for the same reason. The revolutionaries were found to have presupposed, both in their criticisms of their predecessors and in their directives for the future, the truth of certain substantive and controversial philosophical theses. [...] Every philosophical rebel has tried to be “presuppositionless,” but none has succeeded.¹⁰⁷

Williams too admits that it was his youthful quest for a presuppositionless picture of knowledge and justification that led him astray in *Groundless Belief*. But the question remains, whether an openly interest-relative account of inquiry can satisfy the urge that Stroud insists is so deeply rooted in our nature. This urge to differentiate between knowledge and mere opinion is surely deeply rooted in the Western tradition. The question is how to motivate a fresh envisioning of what philosophy may aspire to.

The question we now face is simply: How long can we continue business-as-usual philosophy? Recently, Simon Blackburn has suggested that “[i]t is almost impossible to see how analytical philosophy can be practiced in good conscience.”¹⁰⁸ But in some camps, the analytical tradition carries on unabated. It is crucial to note that Rorty’s efforts, though given a wide audience, were neither original, nor pioneering. Consider the following passages, published in 1917, in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*. Hopefully the obscurity of the reference is more than made up for by the relevance to my argument. Within a general discussion of what we would now call naturalized epistemology, Max Eastman derides Bertrand Russell’s then-recently published Lowell Lectures, *On Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy*:

I always approach these metaphysical books in the mood of the gentleman who said: “Well, how do you do?—Not that I give a damn, but just to keep up the

conversation.” [...] We all darkly know that we are dishonest when we write metaphysics.¹⁰⁹

Are “we all” dishonest? Are “we all” aware of that? Have “we all” had our heads in the sand for at least this long? What value can this “dishonest” conversation really have? I do not think most epistemologists would be comfortable assessing their own work this way.

How are we to account for the division even within contemporary epistemology between those who seem content to pursue traditional epistemological questions, and those who are moving on, either to a proposed successor discipline (like naturalized epistemology) or other realms of philosophy altogether (aesthetics, ethics, politics)? Consider Smart’s extremely modest suggestion: “Even though we cannot get agreement among competent philosophers, even within the same analytic and scientific tradition, it is surely well worth while to try to clarify the metaphysical issues and to get agreement at least between likeminded philosophers.”¹¹⁰ If this is the self-image toward which contemporary epistemologists are being pushed, then surely there are very significant revisions taking place at the metaphilosophical level.

One surefire way of continuing the conversation of traditional epistemology is to agree to act like ostriches, and bury our heads in denial of the fundamental metaphilosophical issues that threaten traditional philosophy. Indeed, this is how Chisholm suggests most epistemologists act concerning the problem of the criterion.¹¹¹ Although Chisholm has continually raised the problem over the past forty years, his challenge has been met somewhat apathetically. Fogelin, even more cynically, suggests that there is something that “might be called ‘the Epistemologists’ Agreement’ not to hold each other to such standards [...],”¹¹² where “such standards” include overcoming the problem of

the criterion, and Agrippa's trilemma. Fogelin speculates that the possible motivation for this agreement is that "it is tacitly understood that no theory can meet them." Perhaps Stroud gets the final word after all. His insistence on the inevitable dissatisfaction attached to the epistemological project may have seemed overstated when considering just the contemporary debate about external world scepticism. Now having located the source of the stalemate in more fundamental metaphilosophical sceptical problems, the gap seems very wide between our traditional aspiration for a completely general non-sceptical epistemology and our achievement of a number of theories of knowledge which are either susceptible to scepticism, or unwittingly sceptical themselves.

4.5 You Must Be Joking: Stephen Leacock's Alternative

The time has come to draw this discussion to a close. We have seen that there is a prevalent thread in contemporary epistemology concerned with, in Charles Taylor's words, dissecting "the corpse of epistemology."¹³ This includes trying to accurately describe what sort of aims and assumptions *were* at work in the traditional conception of theories of knowledge. However, attempts to extricate contemporary theories of knowledge from inherited assumptions prove exceedingly difficult, since adopting a revisionary stance is a complex undertaking. One common ploy is to rely on some argument from failure or despair to motivate the change. Hume, Quine, and Rorty all suggest that an understanding of the spectacular failure of traditional epistemology will suggest to any progressive thinker that it is time to try something different. Such "arguments" are hardly formal or rigorous. We saw Hume's reliance on such an argument in Chapter 2. Quine, as we saw above, motivates his switch to replacement naturalism

after considering the demonstrable history of failure in attempting to make a legitimating project like Hume's succeed. A specific example from Rorty, concerning giving up correspondence theories of truth, exemplifies their common form: "[T]he pragmatist can only fall back on saying, once again, that many centuries of attempts to explain what 'correspondence' is have failed [...]." ¹¹⁴ From this, Rorty moves quickly to admitting the existence of "realist intuitions," which support our sense that truth must have something to do with correspondence, but then counsels that "the pragmatist's quarrel with the intuitive realist should be about the status of intuitions." In other words, the pragmatist "should then try to change the subject." ¹¹⁵ I have argued that whether we feel compelled to continue the traditional project, despite its history of failure, stems more from making a metaphilosophical decision about what criteria of satisfaction (whether formal, traditional, or intuition-driven) are to be sustained and what self-image we are presenting, rather than recognizing that a persuasive argument can be given for either conclusion.

There is considerable agreement that the traditional problems (including the strength and persistence of the sceptical challenge) arise out of a nexus of key epistemological concepts and intuitions. These include: foundationalism as a theory of justification that seeks to rest all knowledge on the basis of certain basic, incorrigible beliefs; objectivity conceived as detached, non-perspectival assessment; the epistemic priority of sense experience over knowledge of the world; and the very nature of the generality sought in philosophical inquiry, which differs from 'everyday' interests. I am not concerned with arguing for the priority of one of these concepts over others. Similarly, I am not interested in trying to precisely quantify to what degree "the quest for

certainty” (Dewey) underlies the strength of the scepticism, as opposed to, say, “the quest for objective knowledge” (Nagel). As Williams’ detailed analysis suggests, core epistemological concepts such as objectivity, epistemic priority, foundationalism, and general inquiry conceived as a detached assessment of the totality of our knowledge are interrelated in numerous, complex ways. Delineating the threads, and perhaps precisely mapping them (as Williams tries to do with his theoretical diagnosis of “epistemological realism”) is far less important I think, than trying to decide which moral we are to take from the current impasse. Despair about our failures, and pessimism about our future prospects, seems to be held as the only possibility. What possible verdicts can be drawn from the realization that the results of the traditional epistemological project never came close to living up to our original aspirations?

To review Stroud’s position—which holds that dissatisfaction is likely the inevitable outcome of attempting to construct philosophical theories of knowledge—consider his primary claims: If Descartes is granted the correctness of his formulation of the problem, then scepticism follows. If Hume is granted his empiricist starting point, the priority of sensory experience over knowledge of the world follows, and our belief in the external world will never be justifiable. In order to construct a satisfactory theory of knowledge, it must take the form of a detached assessment of the totality of our objective knowledge all at once. It must also avoid other formal and intuition-driven criteria of satisfaction concerning adequate theory construction: it cannot beg the question, should not appear ad hoc, etc. From this Stroud suggests:

[...] the threat I see is that once we really understand what we aspire to in the philosophical study of knowledge, and we do not deviate from the aspiration to

understand it in that way, we will be forever unable to get the kind of understanding that would satisfy us.¹¹⁶

Williams contends that this is needlessly pessimistic. However, strict adherence to Stroud's criteria of satisfaction was shown in Chapter 3 and 4.2 to block the contemporarily popular contextualist, naturalist, and externalist responses to scepticism.

Furthermore, Stroud also denies that

if we did come to see how and why the epistemological enterprise is not fully valid, or perhaps not even fully coherent, we would then possess a satisfactory explanation of how human knowledge in general is possible.¹¹⁷

In other words, diagnoses that aim to show that traditional epistemology is wrong-headed may suggest that we abandon or revise the project, but it will not thereby satisfy our original desire or urge to understand human knowledge in a particular way. This would just be another way of showing how our achievements in epistemology remain distant from our aspirations. Dissatisfaction would follow on this count too, since, according to Stroud, the requirements set out in our tradition must speak to something "deep in our nature." Contrast this view with Rorty's considerably more historicist, if not dismissive, stance:

From the pragmatist point of view the claim that the issues which the nineteenth century enshrined in its textbooks as "the central problems of philosophy" are "deep" is simply the claim that you will not understand a certain period in the history of Europe unless you can get some idea of what it was like to be preoccupied by such questions.¹¹⁸

Although Rorty is criticizing other contemporary epistemologists, the substance of this critique captures my complaint with Stroud: Their common error is that they "devote themselves to safeguarding the tradition, to making us even more deeply Western. [...] They use the existence of figures like Descartes as indications of something important

about *human beings*, not just about the modern West.”¹¹⁹ In Chapter 3, I argued that Stroud’s claim about the entrenchment of obtaining this particular kind of understanding in our “nature” as opposed to just our tradition seems dubious, or at least not capable of substantiation. As such I want to flesh out one possible alternate attitude we could take toward the inability of epistemologists to ever obtain the wholesale legitimating theory of our knowledge of the external world. Although I have major reservations about the relevance of Rorty’s “post-Philosophical culture” to the concerns and methods of most philosophers (including Stroud), I am at least convinced enough of the failure of contemporary epistemology to overcome sceptical difficulties that I will venture in this final section to act like Rorty’s “philosopher who has abandoned pretensions to Philosophy.” The sign of this “all-purpose intellectual”¹²⁰ would be that

[h]e passes rapidly from Hemingway to Proust to Hitler to Marx to Foucault to Mary Douglas [...]. He is a name-dropper who uses names such as these to refer to sets of descriptions, symbol-systems, ways of seeing. His specialty is seeing similarities and differences between great big pictures, between attempts to see how things hang together.¹²¹

I want to now turn to the Canadian novelist and humourist, Stephen Leacock’s theory of humour. I will use his theory of humour and its sources to contrast Stroud’s pronouncement of what must follow from the recognition of a gap between aspirations and achievement. In a recent article, while outlining the peculiarity of human knowledge, Stroud comments that “[Human beings] are the only thing in the universe who laugh.”¹²² Allow me to compare this admittedly tangential remark by Stroud to Stephen Leacock’s theory of humour. Stephen Leacock, the Canadian humourist and theorist of humour, offers this explanation for the source of all humour:

Humour in its highest meaning and its furthest reach [...] does not depend on verbal incongruities, or on tricks of sight and hearing. It finds its basis in the incongruity of life itself, and contrast between the fretting cares and the petty sorrows of the day and the long mystery of the to-morrow. Here laughter and tears become one, and humour becomes the contemplation and interpretation of our life.¹²³

The final stage of the development of humour is reached when amusement no longer arises from a single “funny” idea, meaningless contrast, or odd play upon words, but rests upon *a prolonged and sustained conception of the incongruities of human life itself*. The shortcomings of our existence, *the sad contrast of our aims and our achievements*, the little fretting aspiration of the day that fades into the nothingness of to-morrow, kindle in the mellowed mind a sense of gentle amusement [...]. On this higher plane *humour and pathos mingle and become one*.¹²⁴

Notice the stark similarity between the situation that Stroud contends must lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction and what Leacock suggests is the source of profound humour. The specific gap that concerns Stroud is the one between the traditional aspirations of epistemology to provide the crown jewel of a fully general legitimating account of how our knowledge of the world is possible, and our repeated failure to achieve such a theory. More generally, Leacock suggests that these contrasts, these disparities between what we desire and what we are capable of bringing to fruition, are the deep source of humour. This is closer to what Rorty means by post-Philosophical irony.

From a Leacockian perspective, the disparity between our traditional epistemological aspirations and what we have actually accomplished in the name of those goals need not necessarily lead to dissatisfaction. Rather, we may see in this situation, that the incongruities between our aims and our achievements, lead us to the view the pretensions of epistemology differently. If Stroud is mistaken about the deep, natural

roots of the specific “urge” leading to traditional epistemology, then humour may be the proper conclusion to be drawn from the root of the human condition. It is only if we can view the kind of understanding that seems forever beyond our grasp as a historically-conditioned contingent project, that we can hope to cleave the necessary distance between our self-image as epistemologists and the project that has been traditionally sought. This detachment from the aim of the project might be required to make the meta-level assessment that we have other options available.

Once again, I call upon Hume’s insights from the *Treatise* to help explain why philosophers are unlikely to find much satisfaction (let alone humour) in this particular situation. This is also an instance of the self-reflexiveness of Hume’s comprehensive view, or what Michaud refers to as Hume’s “discovery of the self-reference of philosophical activity.”¹²⁵ Each part of Hume’s philosophy (or psychology) should be able to turn back on itself and explain its very own nature. Somewhere along the way, Hume suggests—and this should not be too surprising—we become attached not only to the search itself, but also to the object we have set from the start as the goal of the quest. During the course of a general discussion about the role of truth in inquiry, Hume writes:

[...] I shall make a general remark, which may be useful on many occasions, viz. that where the mind pursues any end with passion; tho’ that passion be not deriv’d originally from the end, but merely from the action and pursuit; yet by the natural course of the affections, we acquire a concern for the end itself, and are uneasy under any disappointment we meet with in the pursuit of it.¹²⁶

In other words, although philosophical inquiry may be initially motivated by a general end (say, the pursuit of truth), during the process of investigation, the more specific aim (in Stroud’s case, finding a certain kind of general understanding of the possibility of

knowledge) comes to be desired as much as our primary, general aim. The problem, of course, is that sometimes these general and specific aims can clash or are discovered to be contrary and incompatible.

Once passionately attached to the requirements sought by the formal, traditional, and intuition-driven criteria of satisfaction, there is little hope of coming to accept the situation as humorous (in Leacock's sense). Even though Stroud's formulation of what makes philosophers' encounter with scepticism at once so tantalizing, frustrating, and ultimately unsatisfiable is almost identical to what Leacock describes as the source of all humour—in the case of epistemology, our passionate attachment to its traditional goal condemns philosophers into a number of unseemly conditions. Some are driven to despair (Hume in the *Treatise*); others to dissatisfaction (Stroud); others to increasingly more subtle diagnoses of how philosophy can escape the dilemma of not ending in scepticism, nor significantly altering the pre-theoretical intuitions that drive that project (Williams); and it drives yet more to finally radically revising or even abandoning the epistemological project entirely or in large part (Wittgenstein, Quine, Sosa, Stroud in his radical moments, and Rorty). And if, as it seems to have been with Rorty, these considerations lead to an ironic detachment from most forms of traditional philosophy; and then, further, to a view of philosophy merely as another "form of writing" and not of rigorous argumentation, then one finds themselves far outside the discussion of what most philosophers see as within the bounds of their discipline. One is then liable to be laughed at, and not collectively with, as a widespread recognition of the folly of our traditional epistemological project might encourage.

I do not mean to suggest some off-handed dismissive moral, like “philosophy is a joke,” or “philosophers who take epistemology seriously should be laughed at.” I am only trying to suggest that there is room to assess the perpetual failure of traditional epistemology in ways that do not rely on charges of “pessimism” or evoke feelings of “despair.” Any philosopher, who is familiar with Leacock’s theoretical work on humour, may very well be suspicious of taking philosophical advice from someone who once wrote that “Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is a greater work than Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* [...]”¹²⁷ Fair enough. But the initial reaction to recoil from such a seemingly light-hearted response to the recognition of the impossibility of a centuries-old quest may stem from a buried assumption, namely that humour is lowly, while the pursuit of knowledge is eminently respectable. It would likely seem to most philosophers who have a traditional conception of philosophy’s relation to the rest of human knowledge that comparing its result to the essence of humour is tantamount to dismissing philosophy’s worth or at least significantly downgrading its worth. But perhaps that stems from under-appreciating both the value of humour and begging the question against the possibility of considering the disparity between aspirations and achievements as something other than failure. “The world’s humour, in its best and greatest sense,” Leacock suggests, “is perhaps the highest product of civilization.”¹²⁸ This comment makes more sense in the context of his earlier remark that “[...] humour becomes the contemplation and interpretation of our life.”¹²⁹ In this way, my likening Stroud’s plight with Leacock’s appraisal of humour does not downgrade the significance of either. Consider this final account of humour by Leacock, which also serves to illuminate the

common ground of the situation as outlined by Stroud and an alternative response other than despair and dissatisfaction. Taking this perspective might help to ease the discomfort of what appears to be a reduced esteem for epistemology, by relating it to the unique wonder of human inquiry:

“[Humour’s] basis lies in the deeper contrasts offered by life itself: the strange incongruity between our aspiration and our achievement, the eager and fretful anxieties of to-day that fade into nothingness to-morrow, the burning pain and the sharp sorrow that are softened in the gentle retrospect of time, till as we look back upon the course of our lives, as people in old age may recall, with mingled tears and smiles, the angry quarrels of their childhood. And here, in its larger aspect, humour is blended with pathos till the two are one, and represent, as they have in every age, the mingled heritage of tears and laughter that is our lot on earth.”¹³⁰

It is often assumed that scepticism is important, if it is, with regard to our knowledge of the external world. I have argued that since almost everyone agrees that we are constrained to believe (at least for practical purposes) that we are well aware of the world outside of us, we are better off taking a metaphilosophical interest in scepticism. That is what I have done by diagnosing the problem underlying the contemporary stalemate in the scepticism debate as a failure to appreciate the ancient sceptical concerns about theoretical adequacy and criteria of satisfaction. It is a metaphilosophical issue of the greatest importance whether epistemologists can agree on which formal, traditional, and intuition-driven criteria are worthy of attention. Even Stroud, who seems more concerned with the “depth” and “significance” of external world scepticism than any other epistemologist, repeatedly states that the value of the position cannot stem from its possible correctness. To the contrary, according to Stroud, we could never accept scepticism as the final verdict on human knowledge, so we are better off turning our attention toward questioning the nature of the traditional epistemological enterprise itself.

This turns out to be a dead-end for Stroud, who believes the flaw cannot be located merely in our contingent philosophical tradition. He contends, rather, that the kind of understanding we have sought is rooted in a deep yearning in our nature. If this were the case, we would indeed seem doomed to dissatisfaction. He has no argument, nor any other evidence to offer—other than the evidence of our Western tradition—to locate the failure of traditional epistemology in anything deeper than that particular tradition. However, the prevalence of alternative descriptions of our situation—whether the intuition-subverting pragmatism of Miller and Rorty, or Leacock’s refreshing suggestion that the gap between human aspirations and achievements is the core of humour—offer the hope of a different moral from the failure of traditional epistemology to secure our most deeply held beliefs.

Of course, in making a final judgment, we still face the three broad possibilities outlined by Sextus in the epigraph: Claim victory, claim that no solution is possible, or continue the search. I think the first option is obviously incorrect. Whether epistemologists choose the second or third option, they will have to face the more fundamental issue of how to motivate a change in the criteria of satisfaction that have been shown so resistant to success in the past. At any rate, it should be clear that whether epistemology advances in a revised manner or simply ceases to be practiced in a recognizable way, the issue

is not going to be resolved by any sudden new discovery of how things really are. It will be decided, if history allows us the leisure to decide such issues, only by a *slow and painful choice between alternative self-images*.¹³¹

To take seriously the results of the contemporary debate about scepticism (including the metaphilosophical issues involved) may require taking the aspirations of traditional epistemology, and our continued failure to achieve them, much less seriously.

NOTES

¹ This translation is provided by R.J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, The Arguments of the Philosophers Series, ed. Ted Honderich (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 13.

² Stroud, *Significance*, vii.

³ Williams opens *Unnatural* with the following claims: (1) His focus will be “scepticism in its modern of ‘Cartesian’ form, for which our claim to knowledge of the external world sets the original and paradigmatic problem”; and (2) that nevertheless, his “discussion is meant to have wide implications,” 1. I think Williams fails to see the widest implications of an encounter with scepticism, because he does not pursue the connection between modern scepticism and its ancient ancestor.

⁴ Williams, *Unnatural*, 66.

⁵ Stroud, “Understanding,” 32.

⁶ Stroud, “Understanding,” 32.

⁷ Stroud, *Significance*, xi.

⁸ Stroud, *Significance*, xi.

⁹ The same goes even for philosophers with other primary concerns. For instance, legal philosophers are not expected to rule out the possibility of global, external world scepticism before proceeding to substantiate an account of a problem within constitutional democracies. Moreover, it would seem ludicrous to object to a political theory that “While that may seem like an adequate solution, you have not ruled out the possibility that we are all brains-in-vats.” But this is just to say that epistemology has characteristic concerns and lines of inquiry.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, “Overcoming Epistemology,” in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* ed, Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 465.

¹¹ In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty was concerned to promote the importance of hermeneutics. This interest soon gave way to his neo-pragmatic orientation, for which he is best known. See *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972 – 1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹² W.V. Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 69-90. Reprinted in *Naturalizing Epistemology*, ed. Hilary Kornblith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985), 16. All citations are to the reprinted version.

¹³ Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” 17.

¹⁴ Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” 19.

¹⁵ Stroud, *Significance*, 221.

¹⁶ David Shatz, “Scepticism and Naturalized Epistemology,” in *Naturalism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Steven J. Wagner and Richard Warner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 119.

¹⁷ Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” 24.

¹⁸ Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," 24.

¹⁹ Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," 19.

²⁰ This, of course, is the standard complaint against coherence theories of all sorts—that a theory might be coherent but not true. In other words, any suggestion of a plurality of competing internally coherent theories raises the nagging suspicion that coherence cannot be enough.

²¹ Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," 24.

²² Stroud, *Significance*, 253.

²³ W.V. Quine, *The Roots of Reference* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court), 3.

²⁴ Stroud, *Significance*, 253.

²⁵ Quine, *Roots of Reference*, 1.

²⁶ Quine, *Roots of Reference*, 3.

²⁷ Quine, *Roots of Reference*, 2.

²⁸ Quine, *Roots of Reference*, 3.

²⁹ Quine, *Roots of Reference*, 3.

³⁰ W.V. Quine, "The Nature of Natural Knowledge," in *Mind and Language*, ed. Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 67.

³¹ Ernest Sosa, "Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity," reprinted in *Scepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Keith DeRose and Ted Warfield (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 99.

³² Sosa, "Epistemic Circularity," 100.

³³ The author of the Fourth Set of Objections put it this way:

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists.

But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently true.

See "Objections and Replies," in Rene Descartes, *Selected Philosophical Writings*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 142.

³⁴ Sosa, "Epistemic Circularity," 106.

³⁵ Sosa, "Epistemic Circularity," 107, emphasis in original.

³⁶ Williams, *Unnatural*, 119, emphasis added.

³⁷ Stroud develops this line of thinking in a different, but related way, in "Understanding Human Knowledge in General," 40-47.

³⁸ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 299.

³⁹ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 301.

⁴⁰ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 300.

⁴¹ Anthony Rudd "Scepticism: Epistemic and Ontological," *Metaphilosophy* 31, no. 3 (2000): 251.

⁴² See Goldman's pioneering work in reliabilist epistemology, "What is Justified Belief?" in *Naturalizing Epistemology*, ed. Hilary Kornblith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985), 91-113; Also, Alvin Goldman *Epistemology and Cognition*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press: 1986).

⁴³ Sosa, "Epistemic Circularity," 93-94.

⁴⁴ Stroud, "The Goal of Epistemology," 303, responding to Sosa's claim in "Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity," 93.

⁴⁵ Williams, *Unnatural*, 7.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Unnatural*, 15, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Stroud, *Significance*, vii.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Unnatural*, 1.

⁴⁹ Williams, *Unnatural*, 66.

⁵⁰ Roderick Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 65.

⁵¹ Sosa's overall view is complex and sophisticated. By calling Sosa a "methodist" I mean only to refer to his stance against Stroud; more specifically I am referring to the fact that he thinks we can and must specify a way (or method) of reliably forming beliefs before we can assess the adequacy of particular beliefs.

⁵² All of the above quoted terms come from Chisholm, "Reply to Amico," 231-234.

⁵³ Chisholm, *Foundations*, 75.

⁵⁴ Chisholm, *Foundations*, 75.

⁵⁵ David Kaplan, "Epistemology on Holiday," in *Scepticism*, ed. Michael Williams (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1993), 472.

⁵⁶ David Shatz, in "Skepticism and Naturalized Epistemology," offers a valuable discussion of the importance of providing a dialectically effective argument if one hopes to overcome scepticism satisfactorily.

⁵⁷ Kaplan, "Epistemology on Holiday," 473.

⁵⁸ These are discussed in Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R.G. Bury (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 164-177. See also R.J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics. The Arguments of the Philosophers*, ed. Ted Honderich (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 182-192. Williams deals with these issues, and coins the label in *Unnatural*, 60-68.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Unnatural*, 60.

⁶⁰ Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, 186.

⁶¹ Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, 186. Hankinson traces these strictures against these kinds of argumentation to specific texts of Plato and Aristotle at 187-190.

⁶² Chisholm, *Foundations*, 61.

⁶³ Chisholm, "Reply to Amico," 234.

⁶⁴ Bynum, Terrell Ward, and William L. Reese. "Editor's Introduction," *Metaphilosophy* 1, no. 1 (January 1970): 1.

- ⁶⁵ Morris Lazerowitz, "A Note on 'Metaphilosophy,'" *Metaphilosophy* 1, no. 1 (January 1970), 91.
- ⁶⁶ Robert J. Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 114.
- ⁶⁷ Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections*, 117.
- ⁶⁸ Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections*, 118-119.
- ⁶⁹ Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections*, 118.
- ⁷⁰ Richard B. Miller, "Without Intuitions." *Metaphilosophy* 31, no. 3 (2000): 235.
- ⁷¹ Christopher W. Gowans, "Intuition and Argument in Philosophy: A Critique of Chisholm and Rorty," *International Philosophy Quarterly* 24 (1984): 127.
- ⁷² Gowans, "Intuition and Argument," 128.
- ⁷³ Miller, "Without Intuitions," 240.
- ⁷⁴ Miller, "Without Intuitions," 232.
- ⁷⁵ Smart, "Why Philosophers Disagree," 71.
- ⁷⁶ Miller, "Without Intuitions," 232.
- ⁷⁷ Miller, "Without Intuitions," 239, 236.
- ⁷⁸ Miller, "Without Intuitions," 237.
- ⁷⁹ Michael Williams, Afterword to *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 199-201.
- ⁸⁰ Williams, "The Unreality of Knowledge," 274.
- ⁸¹ Williams, "Still Unnatural," 38.
- ⁸² Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xxii.
- ⁸³ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xiv.
- ⁸⁴ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xiv.
- ⁸⁵ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xxxiii.
- ⁸⁶ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xliii.
- ⁸⁷ Miller, "Without Intuitions," 235.
- ⁸⁸ Miller, "Without Intuitions," 236, 239.
- ⁸⁹ Miller, "Without Intuitions," 239.
- ⁹⁰ Miller, "Without Intuitions," 240.
- ⁹¹ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xxxvii, emphasis in original.
- ⁹² Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xxx.
- ⁹³ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xli, emphases in original.
- ⁹⁴ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xli.
- ⁹⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1908), 62; quoted in Louis Menand, Introduction to *Pragmatism: A Reader*, ed. Louis Menand (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), xii.
- ⁹⁶ Rorty, *Mirror*, 139.
- ⁹⁷ Joseph Margolis, "Richard Rorty: Philosophy By Other Means," *Metaphilosophy* 31, no. 5 (Oct 2000): 537.
- ⁹⁸ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xiv.

⁹⁹ Susan Haack, "Between Scientism and Conversationalism," *Philosophy and Literature* 20 (2) (October 1996): 455, 468-469.

¹⁰⁰ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xlii.

¹⁰¹ J.C.C. Smart, "Why Philosophers Disagree," 71.

¹⁰² Rorty, *Mirror*, 394.

¹⁰³ Richard Rorty, "Habermas, Derrida, and the Function of Philosophy," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* (forthcoming); quoted in Jocelyne Couture, and Kai Nelson, "On Construing Philosophy," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. Supplementary Volume 19: *Meta-Philosophie. Reconstructing Philosophy?: New Essays on Metaphilosophy*, ed. Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nelson (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1993): 52.

¹⁰⁴ I take it to be obvious that the goal of consensus (or at least widespread agreement) follows from the traditional self-image of philosophy as "the" rational approach to understanding issues. Any suggestion that widespread agreement on fundamental issues need not be a goal of philosophy is itself a revisionary metaphilosophical proposal.

¹⁰⁵ Lazerowitz, "A Note on 'Metaphilosophy,'" 91.

¹⁰⁶ Morris Lazerowitz, "Metaphilosophy," *Critica* 5 (1971): 3.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Rorty, "Introduction: Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy," *The Linguistic Turn*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Simon Blackburn, "Can Philosophy Exist?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. Supplementary Volume 19: *Meta-Philosophie. Reconstructing Philosophy?: New Essays on Metaphilosophy*, ed. Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nelson (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1993): 83.

¹⁰⁹ Max Eastman. "The Will to Live." *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 14, no. 4 (February 1917): 106. It is important to note that at the turn of the twentieth century, the term "epistemology" was novel, and what has since become its domain (questions concerning realism, truth, scepticism, and our connection to "reality") were, at this time, still considered issues of metaphysics. Eastman's claim here is meant to cover what we would now call epistemology.

¹¹⁰ Smart, "Why Philosophers Disagree," 81.

¹¹¹ Roderick Chisholm, "Reply to Amico on the Problem of the Criterion," *Philosophical Papers* 27, no. 3 (1988): 231.

¹¹² Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections*, 119.

¹¹³ Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 485.

¹¹⁴ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xxvi.

¹¹⁵ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xxx-xxxii.

¹¹⁶ Stroud, "Understanding," 32.

¹¹⁷ Stroud, "Understanding," 49.

¹¹⁸ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xxxi.

¹¹⁹ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xxxi.

¹²⁰ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xxxix.

¹²¹ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xl.

¹²² Barry Stroud, "Epistemological Reflection on Knowledge of the External World," 345.

¹²³ Stephen Leacock, *Humour, Its Theory and Technique: With Examples and Samples, a Book of Discovery* (London: John Lane, 1935), 17.

¹²⁴ Stephen Leacock, *Essays and Literary Studies* (London: John Lane, 1916), 92-93, all emphases added.

¹²⁵ Yves Michaud, "Hume's Naturalized Epistemology," *Hume Studies* 13, no. 2 (Nov 1987): 375.

¹²⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, 451.

¹²⁷ Leacock, "Humour as I see it," 335.

¹²⁸ Leacock, "Humour as I see it," 335.

¹²⁹ Stephen Leacock, *Humour, Its Theory and Technique: With Examples and Samples, a Book of Discovery* (London: John Lane, 1935), 17.

¹³⁰ Leacock, "Humour as I see it," 336.

¹³¹ Rorty, Introduction to *Consequences*, xlv, emphasis added.

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