

THE ETHICS OF SCEPTICISM: EPISTEMIC BLAME AND THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF EPISTEMIC RISK-TAKING

JESÚS NAVARRO

University of Seville, SPAIN

University of Johannesburg, SOUTH AFRICA

jnr@us.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7036-3929>

Abstract. This paper levels a charge of free riding against the figure of the radical sceptic. Due to their persistent resistance to attributing knowledge to themselves and others, the radical sceptic limits their contributions to the social context to “mere estimates” or “mere opinions.” Through these “careful beliefs,” they aim to avoid all epistemic risk—something they can achieve only at the cost of falling short of the expectations we legitimately have of our cognitive partners, namely, that they carefully offer us their “full beliefs” as critical cognitive attitudes that reflect a personal stance on the facts. The implication of these radical sceptical attitudes in the social context is an imbalance in the attribution of epistemic credit, which justifies, on our part, an attitude of epistemic blame.

Keywords: social epistemology • radical scepticism • epistemic blame • epistemic credit • epistemic risk

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The fundamental cause of the trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt.

Bertrand Russell

1. Introduction

The two ancient forms of scepticism differed in their views on the appropriate conclusion of epistemic attributions:¹ Academic sceptics denied that we have knowledge, while Pyrrhonians opted for the suspension of judgment thereof. Of course, if knowledge entails knowing that one knows, Pyrrhonism is refuted by modus tollens. However, if Academic sceptics held that we have no knowledge at all, they would appear to contradict themselves, since how would they know? And so began an endless dispute. Throughout it, both forms of scepticism were openly defended on the basis of their ethical, prudential or political consequences: prudence in rational choice according



to Academics such as Carneades;² *ataraxia* as the untroubled condition of the soul as advocated by ancient Pyrrhonians, such as Sextus Empiricus; religious tolerant coexistence according to Renaissance Pyrrhonians, such as Montaigne or Charron. . . In each of those cases, scepticism was presented as an overtly ethical position—a paradigm of wisdom and a way of life.

The fact that scepticism was motivated and justified for practical reasons exposed its proponents to practical scrutiny and, perhaps, moral criticism. In instances where either the denial or the withholding of knowledge attributions failed to effectively advance the purported objectives, or hindered individuals from achieving other practical goals—such as decisiveness in prudential or moral judgments, religious faith, or political stability—critics were justified in holding sceptics accountable for their radicalness.

In contrast, contemporary discussions of post-Cartesian scepticism have largely overlooked these practical dimensions of the debate. Descartes himself, to some extent, contributed to the misunderstanding of earlier forms of scepticism when he claimed that sceptics doubt only for the sake of doubting —“ne doutent que pour douter,” (2016 [1637], III, p.61). In truth, they *did* have numerous reasons for doubt, even if not of the type Descartes was searching for. The fact is that, since Descartes, scepticism has been confined to the realm of pure epistemic rationality—what Williams (1978) termed “the project of pure inquiry.” Consequently, scepticism ceased to be considered a defensible personal stance, and much less for its prudential, practical, and even political implications. Instead, it was transformed into the so-called “sceptical challenge”: an abstract puzzle that leads us to a conclusion probably not held by anyone seriously, yet elusive to refutation. This way of framing the issue is evident in Crispin Wright’s approach to the topic, for instance. In his view, scepticism should not be treated as a personal stance, but rather as a set of arguments, not held by anyone, which lead to a paradoxical conclusion (1991, p.88-90). From this perspective, the practical motivations that once underpinned classical forms of scepticism appear as an incoherent thrust, one that is hardly incompatible with their rational pedigree as philosophical positions—as defended by Perin (2015).

Once we accept the sceptical challenge, the ability to allocate blame in a disagreement with the now merely imagined sceptic becomes frustratingly asymmetrical. The hypothetical radical sceptic relies on strictly epistemological arguments, such as those grounded in underdetermination or closure (see Pritchard 2016). According to arguments based on under-determination, the basis of our knowledge attributions is not solid enough to sustain what we think we know. According to those based on epistemic closure, if we knew what we think we know, we should also know other things strictly implied by this, things that we do not seem to know. One way or the other, we are criticised for ascribing knowledge to ourselves and others when, from their perspective, we should be more cautious. Conversely, as non-sceptics, it becomes quite

hard for us to criticise their position, or at least to find grounds for the appropriate kind of blame, as their conclusion always appears to be rationally permissible according to epistemic standards. As Simion (2023) has recently shown, normative work in epistemology has mostly been negative, concerned with restricting permissions to believe, assert, or use as a premise in reasoning, whereas much less work has been made on epistemic *obligations*, which are what we need in order to blame the sceptic. Once prudential, moral, or political motivations are set aside, the sceptical position seems to be frustratingly faultless. A recent example is how Baehr (2010, 204) exculpates the sceptic from being “epistemically malevolent”.

But why should we take the sceptical challenge and leave practical reasons aside? Modern discussions of scepticism usually present two opposite motivations for this: either scepticism has no practical effects whatsoever, or those effects do not qualify as “the right kinds of reasons” to dismiss it (Way 2012). The first attitude invites indolence, as if scepticism were just a diversion (e.g., see Schwitzgebel 2017). The second one echoes Humean chagrin and distress (2011 [1740], *A Treatise*, IV, 7, 236), assuming that practical consequences would be devastating, but that this prompts us to lament the implications of the sceptical arguments, not to question their soundness.

One way or the other, nestled in the impregnable fortress of pure inquiry, the blameless sceptic easily becomes “radicalized,” asserting not only that everything we believe to know could be false but that it could *all* be false at the same time, questioning the very existence of an “external world”—a move that was beyond the reach of ancient forms of scepticism.³ But scepticism does not have to reach the final extreme of radicalization to be too radical. The way I will understand it here, it is a matter of degree: sceptics may be considered as radical when they go *too far*—in a way to be specified—in their denial or suspension of knowledge attributions.

Beyond this brief historical contextualization, the goal of this paper is not to offer a historical reconstruction of classical sceptical views or their implications. The paper will also sidestep another well-worn path here, refraining from attempting to refute the sceptics once more by proving their arguments wrong. Any reader anticipating this will undoubtedly be disappointed. On the contrary, the paper is a conceptual exploration of the way radically sceptical attitudes may be socially assessed in normative terms. What I intend to do, after this historical warm-up, is to explore a way to shift the blame back onto the radical sceptic, preparing the ground for what I would like to call *an ethics of scepticism*.⁴ In this endeavor, my arguments will not be directed at radical sceptics with the aim of convincing them that the evidence we possess may be sufficient for knowledge, which would refute their cautious attitudes. Instead, I expect my audience to be *us*, the non-sceptics, among which I seek to instill the appropriate attitude of blame towards them, which is what I take to be a first step towards such ethics.

Here is the structure of the paper. In §2 I'll introduce the notion of epistemic

blame emphasising its proleptic functions. In §3 I will reject a direct route to blaming radical sceptics, based on the straightforward postulation of obligations to know. This route will turn out to be a dead end: we can only complain that they do not *believe* things. §4 is the central section in this paper, where I accuse radical sceptics of acting as free riders in a social cognitive system of trust, an accusation that will be leveled in terms of an ethics of belief suspension. This proposal comes with a challenge though, that I present in §5 and meet in §6, namely, to prove that epistemic denial or suspension renders it impossible for the sceptic to form outright beliefs, forcing them to produce what I call “careful beliefs”. My complaint is that those careful beliefs may only be either mere estimates (§7), which do not amount to personal stances, or mere opinions (§8), that are only about appearances and not about the facts. I argue that these cognitive outputs may only serve as flawed substitutes for outright belief, insofar as they fail to fulfill its roles in the social context. In §9, I address a final objection: radical sceptics might argue that they contribute to social cognition by suggesting that, even if they do not contribute with outright beliefs, their persistent doubts and critical attitudes could still enhance social epistemic functioning. However, for this objection to hold weight, such sceptical attitudes would need to be appropriately contained. This talks in favour of my position, as it highlights the importance of the proleptic functions of epistemic blame. Finally, in §10, I draw my conclusions.

2. Why blame?

One might question the purpose of *blaming* the sceptic when, strictly speaking, nothing in my argument is even intended to prove that their arguments are wrong. This section provides some motivation for this, attempting to show that blame, and not simply theoretical criticism, ought to be our target.

My contention is that we have valid reasons to raise concerns about radically sceptical attitudes among members of our epistemic community. I understand the idea of epistemic community in the broadest sense: anyone we are merely talking to is a part of it, insofar as we engage in conversations that have at least a minimally epistemic goal. I do not care here about sceptics who are not among us, and are not part of the community we belong to. The focus will then be placed on the social milieu that we share, under the assumption that we are somehow engaged in a collective endeavor to understand the world and know the facts, an endeavour in which we all depend on each other. To be responsible contributors to this community, I will contend, our beliefs need to be adequately linked to knowledge attributions, in a way to be specified. The charges are that radical sceptics fall short in establishing this connection appropriately, which makes it legitimate for us to complain about their epistemic shortcomings.

But one could hold that the notion of blame is emotionally charged, and perhaps simple theoretical criticism would be more appropriate. However, giving a look at the functions of moral blame provides us with a response. In that context, blame is understood as a reactive attitude that serves several proleptic or anticipatory functions and benefits for communities. Blame is not merely a private mental occurrence, but a dispositional attitude recognizable by others, playing a crucial role in social coordination that both explains and justifies its appropriateness. It brings wrongdoing to light, motivating wrongdoers to align in the future with shared reasons they may not have initially recognized, and it thus has an extremely valuable social constructive power—functions of blame described by Williams (2004) or Fricker (2016).

If this holds true for moral blame, it's reasonable to expect a similar dynamic in the case of epistemic blame. Indeed, it has been argued that epistemic blame, understood as the negative reactive attitude we have towards each other for our *epistemic* shortcomings, serves a comparable proleptic function in social epistemic practices, involving characteristic dispositions to reproach, manifesting upset feelings, and requesting reasons for the wrongdoing, all of which would be productive in fostering epistemic behaviour. Epistemic blame would thus contribute to the construction of epistemic communities built on relationships characterized by reciprocal intentions and expectations oriented towards each other's epistemic agency, as described by Piovarchy (2021), or Boulton (2021). In this paper, my aim is to illustrate that socially beneficial forms of epistemic blame can be targeted not only at individuals who adopt irresponsible beliefs due to gullibility, as is often emphasised (and as sceptics themselves so often do), but also at those who display an excessive *reluctance* to attribute knowledge to themselves and others.

Merely theoretical criticism is unlikely to fulfil these proleptic functions, as it lacks this emotional charge and this dispositional profile. Therefore, we can expect greater advantages from blaming the sceptic rather than simply pointing at their shortcomings. However, blame should not only be considered for its positive outcomes; to avoid being overtly unfair, it must stem from genuine blameworthiness, rather than from merely a blameless mistake that could be easily excused. My aim in the upcoming sections is precisely to demonstrate that the shortcomings of radical sceptics are not just excusable faults, but truly criticizable behaviour to be avoided, due to its harmful effects on the social system of epistemic trust.

3. The short way: an ethics of knowledge

This short section explores an equally short way toward my goal: holding that radical sceptics fail to fulfil their epistemic obligations—in the sense that they fail *to know* many things they should know, according to what is sometimes called an *ethics of*

knowledge (see Axtell 2021). Unfortunately, this path leads to a dead end. However, by navigating through it, we may glean something of significance.

Blaming radical sceptics would be straightforward if we could simply point to the fact that they fail to know numerous things that they should know. Our existence is certainly rife with such epistemic obligations, stemming from our professional roles or societal positions: things that we should know, facts that we should ascertain, implications we should have figured out, and so on —where these “shoulds” do not represent mere expectations, but *normative* obligations (as claimed by Goldberg, 2017). Daily, we hold each other accountable for not fulfilling these duties, with the level of severity contingent on the stakes involved. The radical sceptics’ hesitancy to ascribe knowledge to anyone, themselves included, would imply a negligent shortfall in meeting these epistemic duties and a blameful failure to adhere to the standards of what may be called an *ethics of knowledge*. Given that everyone should know many things, none of us should be a radical sceptic. End of story.

Unfortunately, this short way towards my target proves unviable, since the sceptics will either deny that they *can* know, as Academics did, or that they can know if they know, together with Pyrrhonians, each alternative leading to an excused form of norm violation. Knowledge would become either an unrealizable duty (and therefore scarcely a duty at all, at least if ‘ought implies can’), or one that can never be responsibly fulfilled (given the perpetual uncertainty about success in knowing).⁵

A weakened version of an ethics of knowledge might propose that, while strictly speaking, there are no obligations to know, we are, at the very least, obligated to put ourselves *in a position to know*. But this proposition falls short as well, as the sceptic can maintain blamelessness by either denying the capacity to effectively put herself in a position to know, or by remaining uncertain about whether she has indeed reached that position. One way or the other, we are back to square one.

Short route blocked, we have no alternative but to take a longer one. This one does not proceed straight into an ethics of knowledge, but across a much more intricate path that traverses the ethics of belief.

4. The long way: an ethics of belief suspension

Let us assume that there are no obligations to know that the sceptics culpably fail to fulfill. Nonetheless, there might be obligations *to believe* that they consistently neglect.⁶ We would not complain that they fail to fulfil their epistemic duties, but only their less demanding *doxastic* duties.

This second approach delves into the realm of the ethics of belief, a field that emerged from a well-known nineteenth-century dispute between William Clifford (1999 [1877]) and William James (1956 [1896]) — see Chignell (2018) or Peels

(2017). As a borderland at the intersection between epistemology and ethics, this field is fraught with thorny disagreements concerning the nature and possibility of the norms governing belief formation. Perhaps belief cannot be subject to ethical norms at all, given that belief aims at truth, as Williams (1973) famously defended. Regarding the content of belief norms, the idea that knowledge is the norm of belief may at first look like a promising way for me to go, although the same reply that the sceptic produced against the short way could be reproduced there. I am quite convinced by Chrisman (2020) in these respects, but this will be mostly irrelevant since my goal is to show that the sceptic ought to be concerned by this array of questions at all, whatever their correct answers may be.

In particular, many are resistant to acknowledge the very possibility of an ethics of belief, wondering how our cognitive processes, confined to the privacy of our minds, may at all be subject to duties and obligations. While our actions and words undeniably have social repercussions, our thoughts appear to have in and by themselves no effects on others. However, against this reluctance, I want to recover Clifford's original idea that there is an ethics of belief *itself*, as a cognitive state, independently of what is at stake in acting on those beliefs or voicing them out:

Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age. [...] Belief, that sacred faculty which prompts the decisions of our will, and knits into harmonious working all the compacted energies of our being, is ours not for ourselves but for humanity (Clifford, 1877/1999).

Despite its charmingly outdated pomposity, the underlying idea of this quote remains defensible nowadays: those who believe irresponsibly jeopardize our shared pool of cognitive resources, even if their intention is to keep their beliefs to themselves. However, in order to rephrase Clifford's intuition in a less sumptuous style, in what follows I will recurrently employ different iterations of Descartes' famous apple picking analogy. Here is Descartes:

Suppose he had a basket full of apples, and was afraid that some of the apples might be rotten, and wanted to remove them, so that they did not spread their rottenness to the others, how would he do this? Would he not first of all empty the basket altogether, and then, examining the apples one after the other, put back only those he could see were unaffected, and throw the rest away?"⁷.

The Cartesian insight that I would like to preserve is that forming and keeping beliefs is akin to picking apples: an action that should be carried out with care to avoid ending up with a bunch of rotten apples (false beliefs). This requires attention not only to what we pick from the trees (the beliefs that we form) but also to what might need to be removed from our basket (the beliefs that we keep).

Yet, when applied to articulate Clifford's concerns, the Cartesian analogy requires at least three adjustments. Firstly, it needs to shed its individualistic assumptions: what one's epistemic negligence compromises is not solely one's own basket, but one that is shared among all of us ("not for ourselves, but for humanity"). Secondly, since we join an ongoing apple-picking journey ("fashioned and perfected from age to age"), we must be minimally attentive to the contributions of others. And thirdly, our standards should be sensible to the fact that, at the end of the day, the goal is to end up with *something* edible in the basket—since belief "prompts the decisions of our will", and "knits into harmonious working all the compacted energies of our being".

In essence, what I intend to highlight in the modified apple analogy is that we should understand belief as a common resource generated by a cooperative system of trust, in accordance with the works of Goldberg (2010, 2018), J. Greco (2020), Broncano (2020), or Axtell (2021). And this is a depiction that may align with Clifford, along evidentialist lines, or with James, on the pragmatist side. We hold each other accountable for our contribution to this collective cognitive effort, assigning blame not only when someone's choices result in adverse outcomes for our shared knowledge pool but also when, despite favorable results, their conduct displays negligence or recklessness.

At this point, there seems to be fertile ground for an aspect of the ethics of belief that it is not framed as an ethics of belief *formation*, which was its original form, but rather as an ethics of belief *suspension*. This different perspective involves evaluating two ways in which failure to contribute to the collective effort can be deemed blameworthy. First, by failing to form beliefs when we ought to—leaving apples on the tree that should have been added to our basket. Second, by suspending beliefs already held, either by oneself or others, due to unwarranted hesitation—removing apples from the basket that should have remained. The accountability for these two kinds of failures will prove to be notably different from the type of responsibility we assign for picking rotten apples.

It is from this perspective that the fundamental takeaway of this paper emerges, namely, that radical sceptics can be characterized as a form of 'free riders' in social cognition, cheaters in an epistemic system of trust. Out of fear for getting rotten apples, they refrain from picking any, and they remove all out from our shared basket. Stemming from a pathological aversion to taking risks, this behaviour manifests as a lack of solidarity, with detrimental consequences for others in what I will refer to as *the social dynamics of epistemic risk-taking*. These consequences may be of at least two kinds.

Firstly, each of us faces the possibility of failure when we believe, yet radical sceptics never bear their share in epistemic risk-taking. It's not merely that we invest cognitive effort while they do not, or that we positively contribute while they only

do so destructively, but rather that we accept the consequences of risk-taking while they do not: we occasionally make mistakes, which may provoke reactive attitudes from others, whereas they consistently opt for the safe route, and that is unjust.

Secondly, their reluctance affects us *even when we succeed*. This is because, despite our achievements, they portray us as reckless contributors. Even when we, the non-sceptics, take on epistemic risks and successfully discern how things are, we are perceived as careless thinkers who should have exercised more caution in contrast to the sceptics' circumspection, an outcome that is again unjust when it is the sceptics who have demonstrated epistemic cowardice.

I have no issue with moderate or occasional sceptics, who keep their doubts within reasonable limits, as their contributions significantly enhance the overall functioning of the system. My concern lies with radical sceptics or, in gradable terms, those who are sceptical beyond reasonable limits, as their attitudes corrode the social dynamics of risk-taking and undermine the fundamental basis of social cognitive trust. Vaccine hesitancy stands out as a prominent case (see Goldenberg, 2021, 4-5; but also Cassam, 2021 for a less accusatory perspective). Unreasonable vaccine-hesitant individuals may be less blameworthy than vaccine-deniers who openly disbelieve without sufficient evidence. However, vaccine hesitancy could be likened to a vast underwater iceberg, with vaccine denialism representing only the visible tip. Similar analyses could apply to other instances of denialism, from holocaust to climate change, with alarming political consequences. It is hard to deny that such individuals are far from ideal companions for our apple-picking journey.

5. The sceptic strikes back: distinguishing doxastic and epistemic deliberation

Is my mission complete? Is the ethics of scepticism, assuming the presence of a social dynamics of epistemic risk-taking, merely an ethics of belief, particularly focused on the implications of belief *suspension*? Unfortunately, not quite. I'm afraid we're only halfway there. The reason is that, while radical sceptics may hesitate to assert what they know, or even deny that they know, they could still be portrayed as *carefully forming beliefs* and thereby contributing to social cognition, just as anyone else. Could their beliefs not be just as valuable as ours, true and reasonable, even if they openly acknowledge that they do not amount to knowledge?

In order to debunk this sceptical defence, I will show that it depends on a clear separation between two types of cognitive processes: doxastic deliberation and epistemic deliberation. In this section I will outline these two types of processes with the aim of showing in §6 that, for reasons grounded in the concepts of transparency and logical priority, they are not as independent as the sceptical response would require.

I will begin by introducing the terms first. Let me define doxastic deliberation as the attempt to answer the following question: *Do I believe that p?* This question has three possible outcomes:

DOXASTIC DELIBERATION:

Do I believe that *p*?

(a) I do believe that *p*.

(b) I do not believe that *p* (i.e. I disbelieve that *p*).

(c) I suspend belief regarding *p* (i.e., neither do I believe nor disbelieve that *p*).⁸

On the other hand, let me define epistemic deliberation as the attempt to address a more demanding question: *Do I know that p?* The question here involves assessing whether the belief one holds is sufficiently robust (justified, well-grounded, safe, apt, or whatever epistemic term one cherishes) to meet the epistemic standard required for knowledge. Formulated in this way, epistemic deliberation takes belief as its input and offers three potential outcomes:

EPISTEMIC DELIBERATION:

Do I know that *p*?

(a') I do know that *p*.

(b') I do not know that *p*.

(c') I suspend the self-attribution of knowledge regarding *p* (i.e., neither do I know nor do I deny that I know that *p*).

At first glance, scepticism does not concern itself with doxastic but rather with epistemic deliberation, rejecting the possibility of ever achieving its first outcome, (a'). Academic sceptics would opt for (b'), whereas Pyrrhonians would rather go for (c').

If this line of reasoning holds, sceptics might argue in their defence that their point is not about doxastic deliberation at all. In their view, they could contribute through the outcomes of their doxastic deliberation with (a) or (b), generating what could be termed “careful beliefs”: cognitive attitudes that endeavor to represent the facts, while they either acknowledge (b') or (c'). Even so, sceptics could still potentially contribute something valuable with respect to their doxastic states. In this regard, far from being depicted as free riders, radical sceptics emerge as the most responsible and cautious contributors to our collective endeavor. While the rest of us candidly believe we are contributing knowledge, they recognize their contributions for what they truly are: mere attempts to depict the world, attempts that may fall short—but may also succeed.

The subsequent sections will prove, however, that this counterargument does not hold up under scrutiny. Sceptics cannot simultaneously maintain their scepticism and claim success for the potential positive outcome of their “careful beliefs”. To accomplish this, they must undertake epistemic risks, much like each of us does.

6. Why the sceptics’ “careful beliefs” are not beliefs

The sceptics’ strategy of generating “careful beliefs,” as outlined in the preceding section, might appear to be a win-win strategy for them, allowing them to evade taking epistemic risks while still enjoying the advantages of their cognitive outputs. However, this tactic is deceptive because *producing “careful beliefs,” as radical sceptics may achieve, is not the same as carefully forming beliefs, as the rest of us do*. In this section, I will unpack this little tongue twister.

My concern is that the sceptic’s strategy relies on a deceptive framework regarding the relationship between doxastic and epistemic deliberation, wherein the former is viewed as logically prior to and independent from the latter. To challenge this perspective, we must first acknowledge that doxastic deliberation, as a process of rational belief formation, is distinct from belief *detection* (see Moran 2001, 1.3). When considering the minds of others, we struggle to detect the beliefs that they have independently of our deliberation; in contrast, when each one tries to figure out what one believes, with arguably some exceptions—such as when we try to find out what our beliefs happen to be by reflecting on our own behaviour, or by listening to what others have to say about it—, we *constitute* our beliefs. That means that we make it be the case that we thus believe.⁹

Now, it is often contended that, whenever we constitute our beliefs through doxastic deliberation, we must adhere to the standard that is inherent in the nature of beliefs. Drawing from Bernard Williams (1973), many philosophers assert that this standard is truth. If that is right, we make up our minds regarding whether to believe that *p* or not considering whether *p* is the case. A cognitive state not generated in the pursuit of truth is not a belief but, at most, an instance of wishful thinking. And our earnest attempt to adhere to this standard constitutes our effort to attain knowledge, the factive state that ensures the truth of *p*.¹⁰ In doxastic deliberation then, we engage our mechanisms and strategies for producing knowledge—i.e., epistemic deliberation. As Gareth Evans famously put it, “in making a self-ascription of belief, one’s eyes are, so to speak, or occasionally literally, directed outward—upon the world. [...] I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that *p* by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether *p*” (1982, p.225).

If this line of thought is correct, as I believe that it is, the careful formation of beliefs requires engaging in the pursuit of knowledge. This challenges the sceptic’s

assumption that doxastic deliberation is logically prior to epistemic deliberation. On the contrary, carefully formed beliefs emerge from the quest for knowledge as a kind of byproduct.¹¹

Concerning the independence claim, when our belief stems from a logically prior process of epistemic deliberation, three possibilities arise: we may ascertain that we *do* know and, consequently, firmly believe that *p*, akin to placing an apple into our basket; or, alternatively, we may either conclude that we do not know or suspend judgment thereof—the two forms of classic scepticism. In each of these two options, directly placing our belief into the basket could be deemed at least minimally irresponsible. Acknowledging our lack of knowledge or expressing hesitation in attributing knowledge to ourselves compromises our belief that *p*.

This line of reasoning allows me to refine the accusations. Rather than simply accusing sceptics of being free riders of social cognition, we can assume that they do contribute something to it—their “careful beliefs,” but that their reluctance to make straightforward knowledge self-attributions suggests that what they may responsibly contribute are not genuine beliefs, as the rest of us carefully provide. So, what are they placing in our basket if not apples? Let’s take a closer look.

7. The “careful beliefs” of the Academic sceptic as mere estimates

In this section, the focus is on the effects of radical Academic sceptical attitudes on the social dynamics of epistemic risk-taking. The next section will shift the focus towards the Pyrrhonians.

For Academic sceptics to remain rationally consistent, their denial of knowledge entails a reluctance to publicly affirm any proposition *p* or to simply form a belief that *p* in their minds. Rather than affirming, they merely estimate; instead of believing, they hold a degree of belief or credence.¹² In adopting this approach, they aim to shield themselves from epistemic risks and consequent blame for the consequences of being wrong.

My criticism arises from two notable deficiencies observed in this course of action. Firstly, insofar as they truly remain sceptics, they fall short of delivering what they claim to provide—well-grounded estimates or credences. Secondly, even if they were to succeed in this endeavor, their outcome would still represent an unfair contribution to social cognition.

My first criticism then is that the Academic sceptic’s contribution cannot be well-grounded estimates. I of course have nothing against well-grounded estimates or warranted credences. They obviously play an immensely significant role in our epistemic endeavors. However, in issuing one’s estimates and credences as well-grounded one

does incur in epistemic risk. Those are not merely capricious personal inclinations, but estimations that must be based on established facts—facts that are known—and must be poised to withstand future scrutiny when confronted with facts—facts that are yet to be known. And unless the sceptic claims to *know* these facts, their estimations, as issued as *mere* estimations that incur in no epistemic risk, are irresponsible. From this perspective, radical Academic sceptics are those who deny possessing the necessary factual knowledge to rationally support their own estimates. They thereby deny the possibility of ever attaining the knowledge required to validate them. Formulating and defending warranted estimates necessitates a moderation of their entrenched radical scepticism.

However, even if Academic sceptics were capable of forming the well-grounded estimates they purportedly provide, my secondary criticism would still stand: their contribution would constitute an unfair ruse aimed at reaping the benefits while avoiding the costs. In the case of the rest of us, once our epistemic deliberation approves, we consider ourselves to know, (a'), and present ourselves to others as knowledgeable. Consequently, we form firm beliefs, (a), and perhaps manifest them. In contrast, Academic sceptics conclude epistemic deliberation in denial, (b'), which rationally compels them to only form a degree of credence and to convey a mere estimate to others, always within a probabilistic range between 0 and 1, while the two extremes are admittedly unattainable. However, these gradable attitudes differ fundamentally from our categorical beliefs, as I will now elaborate.

To substantiate this second critique, it's crucial to clearly differentiate between outright beliefs and the specific category of "careful beliefs" known as credences. Firstly, the act of forming a degree of credence does not equate to maintaining a belief. Possessing a credence that *p* is the case, even if it is high but below 1, does not signify belief in *p*. Likewise, holding a low credence that remains above 0 does not indicate disbelief. In both scenarios, the question of doxastic deliberation, "Do you believe *p*?" remains pertinent. Moreover, even estimations of probability 1 are, in some respect, unlike beliefs. Beliefs can vary in firmness and conviction, so they cannot simply be equated with a maximum degree of credence, which requires certainty and admits of no gradation whatsoever. Believing is not what we do when we estimate that some event is absolutely necessary (see Byrne 2019).

One might argue that even if one does not reach either of the two extremes of the probabilistic assessment, there exists a certain probability threshold above which we must believe and below which we must disbelieve, under penalty of being epistemically irrational—a concept often referred to as the Lockean thesis. However, determining what it means to be "epistemically rational" is not a neutral matter. Outright beliefs and degrees of credence have their own independent standards, and it is not evident why the rationality of beliefs should defer to the rationality of credences. For instance, rational belief agglomerates, meaning that if one rationally believes *p* and

rationally believes q , one may rationally believe p & q . In contrast, probabilistic estimations operate differently —see Byrne (2021) and Titelbaum (2022, ch.1). However, irrespective of where and how the threshold is set, it remains possible to inhibit the formation of outright attitudes in spite of the estimate. No degree of credence, in isolation, implies belief. This stems from the distinctive role that each of these cognitive states plays in our cognition: belief serves as a *settling attitude*, whereas credence is not (see Friedman 2019, 310). It's akin to betting at the races: estimating is not betting, *not even estimating with certainty*. Employing Sosa's famous analogy (2015, ch.1): forming a belief is like shooting an arrow towards truth. In contrast, I'd like to add, issuing a "mere" estimation is like assessing how probable it is that one *would* succeed if one shot. Even if the estimate is as high as 1, this is not the same as shooting.

This brings us to the fundamental disparity between beliefs and credences in the social context: *a belief is a personal stance about the way the world is*, whereas a probabilistic estimate, in and by itself, falls short of it. When you believe that p , you personally commit yourself to the idea that p is the case, and the collection of your beliefs forms a worldview, *your* worldview. Engaging in this process is epistemically risky, as you could be wrong, and you may be blamed for this. In contrast, the set of your estimates is not a worldview at all. The concern is not just that "mere" estimates are unsettled representations, but that they are yet not genuine *attempts* at representing. While estimates may serve as fundamental tools in our quest to establish a personal worldview, they cannot replace it. Possessing powerful instruments does not equate to doing anything. The issue with Academic sceptics is that they never utilize these instruments; it is always *us* who take the risk, and that is unfair.

A vivid illustration may be found in the realm of science communication. When scientists refrain from straightforwardly conveying their knowledge to the public and opt for presenting probabilities and estimates, the unintended consequence often emerges: it fuels doubts and uncertainty rather than achieving the intended effect, with devastating consequences on the public and policymakers, who expect carefully formed beliefs rather than "mere" estimates they may later shield behind in case they are wrong. The roots of this excess of caution in science may be traced back to Jeffrey's advice that the scientist's proper activity is not to accept or reject hypotheses but only to assign probabilities to them based on currently available evidence (1956). Vaccine hesitancy serves again as an illustrative example. When questioned about the safety of a vaccine, experts frequently abstain from outright declaring it as safe, opting instead to rely on statistical data. This approach often leaves recipients of expert testimony yearning for a definitive response: "But do you *know* if it is safe?" For an expert embracing an Academically sceptical perspective, the only intellectually honest reply is, "No, I don't," thereby seemingly requiring a "leap of faith" from the layperson.¹³

Yet, one may argue, the estimates of the radical sceptic *could* be right or wrong. And if they happen to be right, might they not deserve credit for this? What would be blameworthy in their cautious approach, if we could all benefit from their efforts to get things right despite their pessimism?

In order to address this objection, we need to clarify it, as it is ambiguous between an ex-post and an ex-ante reading. According to the ex-post reading, if an estimate is correct, it means that what the estimate said was most likely to happen actually happened. Suppose we had an estimate of 0.9 rain and it rained: the forecast was correct in the ex post sense. If this is the interpretation, then the sceptic could only claim credit for her success, at the cost of assuming that she could also be wrong if it does not rain. She would thus be taking an epistemic risk — something she would be doing irresponsibly by remaining sceptical.

Now consider an ex ante reading of the objection: regardless of how things turn out, suppose the sceptic makes an estimate of a .9 chance of rain, and pretends to deserve credit for this because it is the best approach *to what the chances are* (objectively or subjectively). If she has correctly estimated those odds, she can claim credit for her success, or so the thought goes (even if it does not rain in the end and the .1 occurs). But then she would also be exposed to the possibility of failure if her estimate did not match the odds, since it is also possible to be wrong about them. Either way, ex-post or ex-ante, there is no way to claim credit for success unless you are exposed to the risk of failure.

This is so because what we may earn credit for is not just for the ex post success, or the accuracy of the ex ante estimation, but for the rationality of *our attempt* at success based on that estimation. And radical sceptics never take that step: they expect *us* to take it, which is precisely where their blameworthiness comes to the fore. Not exactly in their reluctance to believe, but in their expectation to receive credit for their estimations. They cannot expect recognition for success while simultaneously avoiding accountability for failure. *No pain, no gain*: one cannot claim the accolade of being correct without accepting the possibility of being incorrect.

It is true that, at times, sceptics may be compelled to express their personal viewpoints. However, to maintain their scepticism, they may only do so in the form of speculative conjectures, such as: “I really don’t know but, given my estimates, if I had to say, I guess that *p*.” And the trick with this kind of statement is that it manifests just an act of *guessing*, not an attempt at accurately grasping the truth. Therefore, if they do succeed, it’s not due to their merit, but rather luck. One way or the other, it is unfair if they attribute their failures to bad luck while they expect credit for their successes as achievements. By aiming at apt belief one struggles to attain the truth as a manifestation of one’s cognitive competences; in contrast, by aiming at sheer guessing one overtly suspends that connection, acknowledging that, if one got things right, it would be a matter of good luck, just as, if one got things wrong, it would be

a matter of bad luck—see Sosa (2021, p.24-5, 54, 88, 91).

The analogy of our apple-picking journey may help us drive home the essence of this section: it's as if those sceptics consistently suspected that some part of each and every apple they gather may be rotten, a doubt they would extend to each apple in our bucket. Faced with these pervasive uncertainties, they deposit only a portion of each apple they pick, a mere estimation. This may feel liberating to them, and rather inconsequential—as charmingly shown by Schwitzgebel (2017)—, but it falls short of our expectations, as full apples are what we came here for and what we need. When compelled to place complete apples, they offer us reckless guesses upon which we may choose to rely. In doing so, they claim to contribute while keeping a safe distance from epistemic risk—a luxury they can only afford by transferring the weight of epistemic risk-taking onto our shoulders.

8. The “careful beliefs” of the Pyrrhonian sceptic as mere opinions

When engaging in the social dynamics of epistemic risk-taking, those inclined to Pyrrhonian scepticism will exemplify a different form of epistemic free riding. Their acceptance that knowledge may be possible allows them to embrace full-fledged attitudes, rather than partial estimates. At least they are not placing sliced apples in our basket! Unlike the Academic sceptics, Pyrrhonians, in Sosa's analogy, *do* indeed launch their arrows in apparent efforts to aptly believe. Nevertheless, I will argue that their “careful beliefs” also disrupt the social dynamics of epistemic trust and risk-taking.

Pyrrhonians acknowledge that, like the rest of us, they experience spontaneous inclinations to believe what their epistemic sources—perception, testimony, intuition, and so on—convey. And, like others, rationality demands that they adopt a reflective stance towards these inclinations, engaging in doxastic deliberation: “Should I believe *p*?” Such deliberation, as discussed in §6, involves epistemic deliberation—a process of self-constitution and transparent engagement with the world. However, because Pyrrhonians consistently refuse to conclude epistemic deliberation positively or negatively, either with (a') or with (b') they inevitably find themselves in a state of epistemic suspension (c'): they suspend the self-attribution of knowledge. Consequently, in their efforts to avoid epistemic risk altogether, the most they can do is to reflect their attitudes about how things *appear* to them, which, strictly speaking, is not believing or disbelieving anything about the facts, either (a) or (b), but merely taking a stance about how things look like.

This is how Pyrrhonians are often portrayed in the philosophical tradition: externally, everything they do “fall[s] under the criterion of appearances,” acknowledging

the necessity of being guided by nature and culture, but internally, in their cognition, Pyrrhonians do not give their assent to *any* of these seemings. In their minds, a norm of absolute epistemic risk prevention governs, one dictating that they should consistently refrain from making unqualified judgments—“nothing is more” —see, for instance, Burnyeat (2012, p.216) or Gómez-Alonso (2016). Accordingly, what we get from them then are *mere* opinions, when they are sensibly expected to produce outright assertions and beliefs in the light of the evidence available.¹⁴

In the preceding section, I portrayed the cautious “careful beliefs” of the Academic sceptic with the picture of those scientists who restrain themselves to only issuing mere estimates. But the depiction of the Pyrrhonian attitude in the social context invites a different character, and I can think of none better than that of Paul in Woody Allen’s film *Midnight in Paris*. Embodying the archetype of the insufferable know-it-all imbued with false modesty, Paul always begins each sentence with “If I am not mistaken...”, regardless of the fact that he is obviously knowledgeable about the subject matter. Pyrrhonian sceptics consistently adopt Paul’s attitude at all times, or at least tend to do so much more frequently than is deemed reasonable, acknowledging the perpetual possibility of being wrong.

My concern regarding this character is that, if he is sincere, all of his cautious affirmations, strictly speaking, take the form of disjunctions. What Paul communicates is that either he knows that p , or he doesn’t—a possibility compatible with $\neg p$. His apparent modesty thus transforms into a cunning way of always being right because affirming that either p or $\neg p$ does not amount to asserting p .

Don’t get me wrong here either: I don’t think the expression of mere opinions is problematic or disvaluable, *per se*. However, these opinions are valuable insofar as they contribute to our ongoing quest to figure out the facts. That is why ordinary opinions may clash, and we cannot all be wrong when we disagree with them. When us non-sceptics express our opinions, we provide the rest with a perspective *on the facts*, and we assume the epistemic risk of being wrong. In contrast, Pyrrhonian sceptics avoid such risk. What they offer are *mere* opinions in the sense that they do not aim to represent the facts but only to express how things appear to them, which is perfectly compatible with things appearing totally different to anyone else. Unconcerned with reality, the implicit disjunctive form of their apparent assertions prevents them from being committed to facts in any sense.

The crucial point here is that even if it were eventually proven that proposition p was false, the sceptic’s disjunctive assertion would still be considered correct, thanks to the alternative branch of the disjunction: $\neg p$ (“I am mistaken”), which validates their claim. Pyrrhonians, in this manner, cunningly sidestep the risk of being wrong, just as they evade the risk of genuine disagreement with others. Their stance remains consistently secure, albeit at the cost of never making substantial assertions about the nature of reality, not even cautious ones.

The time has come to reassess the charge of free riding concerning the Pyrrhonian brand of sceptic. Again, it must be acknowledged that they *do* contribute something—their mere opinions. And, in a sense, what they offer is arguably better than the contribution of the Academic sceptic, as mere opinions are at least “full” attitudes. However, given that Pyrrhonians are solely concerned with the way things *appear* to them, not with the way things *are*, what they place into our basket is metaphorically inedible—resembling a perfect, shiny, and unpolluted *plastic* apple. In this other sense, the Pyrrhonians’ contribution is arguably worse than that of the Academic sceptic; their outputs may be full, but they are contentless, not tracking facts but subjective seemings. This keeps them on the safe side, since they can’t actually be wrong at all, but at the cost of failing to genuinely nurture our social epistemic environment.

9. An objection based on the division of cognitive labour

The conclusion drawn from the preceding sections suggests that while sceptics’ formation of “careful beliefs” may enable them to cunningly sidestep epistemic risks, it does so at the expense of not significantly contributing to what we may legitimately expect from them as our epistemic partners. This renders them blameworthy, as the burden of taking epistemic risks in the social context falls solely on us, thus upsetting the balance in the social dynamics of epistemic risk-taking, as described in §4. However, one might wonder if, despite their conduct being reproachable at a personal level, it could potentially have a positive impact on the epistemic functioning of society as a whole. In cases where this occurs, would this not excuse their attitude?

I am willing to bite the bullet that this objection represents, but my aim in this penultimate section will be to demonstrate that we still should lay the blame on the doorstep of radical sceptics.

Let me start by elaborating on why this objection is a bullet I am willing to bite. Embracing a social stance in epistemology means recognising that epistemic labour must be distributed among different agents, each contributing in distinctive ways to our collective pursuit of knowledge—as advocated by Kitcher (1990) in the philosophy of science, or Smart (2018) in epistemology. In line with this rationale, radical sceptics could argue that their role is essentially destructive, and thus we shouldn’t anticipate substantially positive cognitive contributions from them beyond their mere estimates and opinions. Despite not being constructive, their contributions may still have epistemically beneficial effects on our collective deliberations and belief formation processes.

What might those benefits be? Let me sketch three possible responses. First, radical scepticism could function as a mallet against dogmatism, breaking down entrenched prejudices that might otherwise remain unchallenged among us. Secondly, it could serve as a remedy against gullibility, giving epistemically naive individuals

reasons to hesitate when faced with potentially deceitful evidence. Or thirdly, radical scepticism may stimulate new avenues of research, fostering inquiry in circumstances where, in the absence of their persistent criticism, no one would be motivated to explore further.

If this rationale holds true, the attitudes of the radical sceptic, while objectionable at the personal level (displaying epistemic cowardice and an uncooperative reluctance to share in epistemic risk), would still contribute to the virtuous functioning of society, which would instantiate a kind of Mandevillian epistemic intelligence. Hence, the argument suggests they should not be chastised with negative reactive attitudes, such as epistemic blame.

I find this defence a bit cynical on their part, since true sceptics would not claim that the social epistemic system would ever work properly to produce knowledge, or at least we would never know if it did. However, we non-sceptics may still recognise that these benefits of radical sceptical attitudes could indeed occur. And, personally, I am inclined to believe that they do occur. However, even if we concede this point, I maintain that it does not render epistemic blame inappropriate.

The reason is that the beneficial effects of radical sceptical attitudes on social epistemic functioning may only occur *if those attitudes are appropriately contained*—if they remain a minority, and the rest of us *do* take epistemic risks by believing in estimates and striving to move beyond appearances. As Kitcher claimed,

Only if we situate the individual in a society of other epistemic agents ... does it begin to appear rational for someone to assign herself to the working out of ideas that she (and her colleagues) view as epistemically inferior (1990, p.8).

For radical scepticism to have positive epistemic effects, not everyone should be a radical sceptic. Otherwise, our social epistemic resources would resemble a messy bucket filled with slices of apples and beautiful plastic surrogates. Some of us must pick the real stuff, which entails taking risks and subjecting ourselves to blame and criticism when our apples turn out to be rotten. However, if radical sceptics were rewarded with credit without bearing any costs, it is difficult to comprehend why anyone would not be one of them.

This explains why it makes sense that we have a practice of blaming radical scepticism, due to the proleptic functions of blame outlined in §2. Epistemic blame fosters reactive responses and a disposition to reproach, entails a reluctance to further collaborate, and prompts to provide reasons for the wrongdoing, among other factors. This form of epistemic blame imposes social costs on radical sceptical positions, making them less appealing and compensating for the lack of epistemic risk-taking. Without such costs, the social system of epistemic trust and risk-taking would collapse—much like public transportation would fail if free riding carried no consequences.

10. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that radical sceptical attitudes undermine the cognitive system of epistemic trust upon which we all depend. This system relies on responsible epistemic risk-taking, yet radical sceptics persistently avoid risks, behaving as free riders on social cognition. One may think that the issue is not a serious threat insofar as radical sceptics are not too many. But the real problem is not that their numbers might grow and collapse the system; what deserves blame is their objectionable disposition itself, insofar as it distorts the social equilibrium of credit allocation. By playing it safe, they cast us as epistemically reckless, even when we succeed in finding out the truth, thus corroding the foundations of our collaborative cognitive system.

Whether persuaded that knowledge is inherently unattainable (as asserted by Academics) or that its attainment will persistently remain uncertain (as maintained by Pyrrhonians), radical sceptics can only issue what I have called “careful beliefs”: either mere estimates or mere opinions. Both alternatives fall short of matching the substantive contributions made by the rest of us: carefully formed beliefs that represent our best personal perspectives on the facts. While I have acknowledged that radical sceptical attitudes may indeed contribute to the well functioning of the social cognitive system, this can only occur if they are kept within limits and under control. We may achieve this by imposing social costs on those attitudes, a task that the proleptic functions of epistemic blame may ensure.

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Notes

¹To be exact, the sceptical challenges were not directed at epistemic *attributions* but rather at the possibility of knowledge itself. Nevertheless, sceptical stances toward the possibility of knowledge inherently incline towards negative epistemic attributions to oneself or others, or the suspension thereof, which will be the focal point of my discussion. Thanks to Jesús Vega for this and other valuable suggestions.

²As depicted by Allen (2020) or Burnyeat (1982, p.40).

³This results from the shift from “distributive” doubt—doubting that there is a universal possibility of illusion—to “collective” doubt—as the possibility of a universal illusion—see Williams (1978, p. 54) and Navarro (2010).

⁴The project thus belongs to what Sosa (2021, ch.2) dubs “intellectual ethics” more than to gnoseology, insofar as this distinction holds up—but see Navarro & Pino (2024).

⁵One might hesitate to endorse the “ought implies can” principle, which would detach epistemic obligations from human capabilities—see D. Greco (2012). Nevertheless, the insurmountable nature of our epistemic obligations would provide ample justification to excuse any shortcomings, thereby exculpating the radical sceptic.

⁶I understand knowledge as a factive cognitive state, i.e., one that requires truth; in contrast, a belief is a potentially wrong representation of a fact that the agent takes to be true. In this sense, belief—or outright belief, as it is often dubbed—contrasts with mere suspicions, guesses, estimates, and other tentative inclinations to take something to be true. More on this later.

⁷Descartes (2008 [1641]), 220; see Sosa (2017, Ch. I) for a revival.

⁸My focus here lies on definitive attitudes of suspension, which constitute the objective of the sceptic, as opposed to the temporary suspension that occurs while we form opinions on a particular topic. For a discussion on the necessity of distinguishing these two types of suspension, refer to Sosa (2021, 91) or Friedman (2017, p.321-2).

⁹A classical problem in the theory of self-knowledge is how may this constitutive relation ground the epistemic authority for belief self-ascriptions. See Finkelstein (2003).

¹⁰In support of this view, Sosa (2021), Friedman (2017), or Kelp (2021), hold that inquiry is inherently guided by the quest for knowledge as a settling attitude.

¹¹This is how I interpret Sosa's recent claim that "whether one proceeds with gnoseological propriety in thus suspending [...] is determined by what one should do *in the endeavour to answer one's question knowledgeably*" (2021, 91). This may indeed be a point of agreement with Williamson's influential view that belief is "botched knowledge" (2002, p.47).

¹²There is a shared spirit between Carneades' defence of probabilism and some contemporary forms of Bayesianism and formal epistemology that are overtly reluctant to acknowledge the rational employment of traditional categorical epistemic states, such as outright belief or knowledge. However, non-sceptical attitudes are also perfectly compatible with the formal framework—e.g., Moss (2018).

¹³For further insights into the challenges faced by individuals in placing trust in scientific consensus, see Goldenberg (2021, p.138).

¹⁴If these implications from the argument in §6 are correct, then, in Barne's (1982) famous terms, Pyrrhonians cannot remain "urbane", and they necessarily become "rustic". That is, their doubts cannot be confined to philosophical claims and will necessarily extend to beliefs of everyday life. Against this reading, see Fogelin (1994). In any case, my point is not historical or exegetical about ancient Pyrrhonism.

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