



META-PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM, SELF-DEFEAT AND PRAGMATIC JUSTIFICATION

ESCEPTICISMO METAFILOSÓFICO, AUTODERROTA Y JUSTIFICACIÓN PRAGMÁTICA

Shih-Hao Liu

University of Miami, United States

sxl1385@miami.edu

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2620-2377>

DOI <https://doi.org/10.48204/2805-1815.8473>

INFORMACIÓN DEL ARTÍCULO	ABSTRACT/RESUMEN
Recibido el: 31/7/2025 Aceptado el: 31/8/2025 Keywords: Epistemology, meta-philosophical skepticism, self-defeat, pragmatism, pragmatic justification Palabras clave: Epistemología, escepticismo metafilosófico, autoderrota, pragmatismo, justificación pragmática	Abstract: Meta-philosophical skepticism goes that we should suspend our beliefs about philosophical claims. Previously, many argued that prevalent disagreements among peer philosophers motivate the skepticism. One immediate anti-skeptical response is that meta-philosophical skepticism is epistemically self-defeating. In brief, meta-philosophical skepticism calls for the suspension of beliefs about premises deployed in arguments for the very position. This makes the skeptical position ultimately call for belief suspension of itself. Many regard the self-defeat worry as a challenge that meta-philosophical skeptics can hardly meet. In this paper, on behalf of the skeptics, I'll argue that it is possible for meta-philosophical skepticism to sidestep the self-defeat worry with the notion of practical justification. I first contrast traditional evidentialist's view about the ethics of belief which states that beliefs can only be justified epistemically with a pragmatist's view that holds beliefs can also be justified practically. To pragmatists, as long as holding a belief facilitates some practical interest like maintaining a flourishing ordinary life, a belief can be pragmatically justified even if evidence an agent possesses is neutral or silent regarding the justification of the very belief. I contend that the justification of premises deployed in meta-philosophical skeptical arguments can also be explained with pragmatist's view. That is, these premises might be epistemically defeated according to meta-philosophical skeptical arguments. However, skeptics are, in a pragmatic sense, still rational to deploy premises since they exhibit some practical values. While self-

defeat can be a serious issue in the epistemic domain, it is not so detrimental in the practical domain since many principles can be implicitly self-defeated but still pragmatically justified.

Resumen:

El escepticismo metafilosófico sostiene que debemos suspender nuestras creencias sobre afirmaciones filosóficas. Anteriormente, muchos argumentaron que los desacuerdos prevalentes entre filósofos pares motivan dicho escepticismo. Una respuesta antiescéptica inmediata es que el escepticismo metafilosófico es epistémicamente autoderrotante. En resumen, el escepticismo metafilosófico exige la suspensión de las creencias sobre los presupuestos utilizados en los argumentos a favor de la propia posición. Esto hace que la posición escéptica exija, en última instancia, la suspensión de creencia en sí misma. Muchos consideran que el problema de la autoderrota es un desafío que los escépticos metafilosóficos difícilmente pueden superar. En este artículo, en nombre de los escépticos, argumentaré que es posible que el escepticismo metafilosófico eluda el problema de la autoderrota mediante la noción de justificación práctica. Primero contrasto la visión evidencialista tradicional sobre la ética de la creencia –según la cual las creencias solo pueden justificarse epistémicamente– con la visión del pragmatista, que sostiene que las creencias también pueden justificarse prácticamente. Para los pragmatistas, mientras mantener una creencia favorezca algún interés práctico, como el mantenimiento de una vida ordinaria floreciente, dicha creencia puede estar justificada pragmáticamente, incluso si la evidencia que posee un agente es neutral o silenciosa con respecto a la justificación de esa misma creencia. Sostengo que la justificación de los presupuestos utilizados en los argumentos escépticos metafilosóficos también puede explicarse mediante la perspectiva pragmatista. Es decir, estos presupuestos pueden estar epistémicamente derrotados según los propios argumentos escépticos metafilosóficos. Sin embargo, los escépticos, en un sentido pragmático, todavía son racionales al utilizar dichos presupuestos, ya que exhiben cierto valor práctico. Mientras que la autoderrota puede ser un problema serio en el ámbito epistémico, no lo es tanto en el ámbito práctico, ya que muchos principios pueden ser implícitamente autoderrotados y aun así estar justificados pragmáticamente.

Introduction

According to meta-philosophical skepticism, we philosophers should suspend our judgment about philosophical claims. Previously, considerations from various directions have been cited in support of this position. Some argue that widespread disagreements among peer philosophers call for suspension of our beliefs regarding philosophical claims (Beebe, 2017; Brennan, 2010; Goldberg, 2013; Kornblith, 2013; Licon, 2019; Ribeiro, 2011; Segal, 2024). Others formulate the skeptical argument based on reflections on the history of philosophy, which reveals a recurring pattern of failures among once-dominant theories (Mizrahi, 2014, 2016). Still others contend that our philosophical beliefs are

defeated by evidence of the existence of counterevidence that we have not yet be able to conceive or entertain (Ballantyne, 2013, 2015, 2019; Frances, 2016).

A straightforward objection to meta-philosophical skepticism is that the position is self-defeating (Grundmann, 2019; Paár, 2015, 2016). Briefly, the objection holds that arguments for meta-philosophical skepticism require refraining from believing the very premises on which these arguments rely. If this is the case, then skeptical arguments can hardly get off the ground as we can never justifiably infer the intended skeptical conclusion from their premise(s). Many regard this objection a serious yet seemingly unavoidable challenge for skeptics.

In this paper, on behalf of the skeptics, I argue that meta-philosophical skepticism can sidestep the self-defeat objection by appealing to the notion of pragmatic justification. I begin by contrasting the traditional evidentialist's view about the ethics of belief –which holds that beliefs can only be justified epistemically– with the pragmatist view, which maintain that beliefs can also be justified pragmatically. According to pragmatists, as long as holding a belief serves general practical interests, such as sustaining a flourishing ordinary life, the belief can be pragmatically justified even when the evidence possessed by an epistemic agent is insufficient, or even contrary to the belief itself. I contend that the justification of premises deployed in meta-philosophical skeptical arguments can similarly be account for from a pragmatist perspective. That is, while these premises may be epistemically defeated according to the skeptical arguments themselves, skeptics are nonetheless pragmatically still rational in deploying them, given their value in certain practical dimensions of our everyday lives. Whereas self-defeat constitutes a serious problem in the epistemic domain, it is far less damaging in the practical domain.

The plan for the paper run as follows. First, I present a version of argument for meta-philosophical skepticism as a paradigmatic example and the self-defeat objection it faces. I also discuss some skeptics' responses and explain why they fail. Then, in next section, I introduce the notion of pragmatic justification and explain how the notion helps meta-philosophical skepticism to circumvent the self-defeat objection, and finally, I consider and respond to several potential challenges to my argument.

Two clarifications should be made before proceeding. First, the meta-philosophical skepticism discussed in this paper refers to a *global* version of the position. It targets all

(or nearly all) philosophical claims. By contrast, some theorists defend a more *local* form of meta-philosophical skepticism, which specifically challenge particular philosophical methods, such as intuition (Machery, 2017; Alexander, 2012) or inference to the best explanation (IBE) used in metaphysics particularly (Bryant, 2020; Bueno & Shalkowski, 2020). These local versions will not be the focus of this paper. Second, in previous works, many have pointed out that the strategies in arguments for meta-philosophical skepticism can also be used to cast doubt on controversial claims in other domains, such as politics or religion. While I acknowledge this generalizing implication, I will set aside further discussion of it due to space constraints.

Meta-philosophical Skepticism and the Self-defeat Objection

As noted in the previous section, there are various forms of meta-philosophical skepticism, each grounded in different considerations. For the sake of a more focused discussion, I'll present a version of the skeptical argument based on peer disagreements as a toy model for the subsequent discussion. Let p represent a given philosophical claim or thesis. Consider the following argument:

- (P1) There are widespread peer disagreements among philosophers concerning various philosophical matters.
- (P2) If there are widespread peer disagreement among philosophers concerning various philosophical matters, then philosophers should suspend judgment about p .
- (Conclusion) Philosophers should suspend judgment about p .

Following the characterization found in previous literature, I understand a *peer disagreement* as a disagreement concerning some subject matter between different parties who possess roughly the same body of evidence and are approximately equal in intellectual and cognitive capacities. And peer philosophers, as we examine their discussions on various philosophical topics, disagree widely. Not only do philosophers disagree on whether a particular philosophical claim p is true, but also on a variety of related matters, like whether other philosophical claims interconnected to p (say some implication of p) are true, or whether arguments, inferences, methods that are used to support (or refutes) p are true or not. From this perspective, (P1) should appear *prima facie* plausible. I'll set aside some of the complexities surrounding the truth of (P1). One

might question whether philosophers *actually* disagree about every (or nearly every) philosophical issue, a claim that may require empirical support. (Previously, a survey conducted by Bourget & Chalmers (2014) documents philosophers' judgements on 30 substantive issues in philosophy.) I'll avoid further controversies and assume that there is sufficient degree of peer disagreements among philosophers to render (P1) true for the purposes of this discussion.

Now, if philosophers whom I regard as peers reach different judgments than I do, then whether I'm justified in believing the philosophical claims in question becomes doubtful, as expressed by (P2). Brennan conveys a similar idea, stating that "radical dissensus shows that philosophical methods are imprecise and inaccurate" (2010, p.3). Likewise, Goldberg argues that disagreements among peer philosophers provide defeaters "by way of making salient the possibility that at least one of the disputing parties to the debate is unreliable" (2013, p. 170). Thus, the consideration of widespread disagreement gives rise to an epistemic obligation to suspend our judgement regarding philosophical claims.

A straightforward yet powerful anti-skeptic objection to the argument above is that it is *self-defeating*. For an argument to be persuasive, it seems minimally true that we should be epistemically justified to believe or know its premise(s). However, according to the argument itself, we should refrain from believing in the premise(s) deployed in it. Consider substituting (P2) for *p* in the argument above. If it is plausible to expect a widespread disagreement among philosophers regarding the truth of (P2), then we should find whatever epistemic justification of (P2) we have being defeated by peer disagreements as suggested by the argument itself and hence should refrain from believing in (P2). A similar line of reasoning applies to (P1). Grundmann (2019) argues that the plausibility of (P1) depends on our ability to identify epistemic peers, at minimum, by evaluating their track records. However, such identification is possible "only if one presupposes that those philosophical beliefs that form the basis of track-record evaluations are justified" (p. 224). Yet, the skeptical argument itself instructs us to suspend judgment about those very beliefs. As a result, (P1) is also defeated. If we are not justified in believing either (P1) or (P2), then we have no reason to accept the argument's

reasoning or endorse its skeptical conclusion. In this way, the skeptical argument fails to get off the ground.

This line of self-defeat objection can be further generalized to other versions of skeptical arguments for meta-philosophical skepticism. Consider, for instance, a version of the skeptical argument grounded in a form of pessimistic historical meta-induction:

(P1*) The history of philosophy reveals a pattern in which past philosophers failed to entertain or conceive serious objections to what were then considered the most promising philosophical theses.

(P2*) Present day philosophers likewise fail to entertain or conceive serious objections to what are now considered the most promising philosophical theses, including *p*.

(P3*) If (P2*) is true, then we should suspend our judgment about *p*.

(Conclusion) We should suspend our judgement about *p*.

In a series of examples cited by Mizrahi, several past accounts that were once regarded as the most promising ones were later found to face serious objections that their original proponents failed to conceive. For instance, the traditional justified true belief (JTB) analysis of knowledge was challenged by Gettier (1963). Or the descriptive theory of proper name was later met with Kripke's influential modal objection (Kripke, 1980). These ample examples in the history show a pattern which render (P1*) to be true. Of course, it is controversial whether this historical pattern has been exaggerated. Nevertheless, I'll take (P1*) to be at least *prima facie* plausible and proceed accordingly. Now, if we assume the pattern described in (P1*) holds, we can inductively infer (P2*). For any given philosophical thesis that we're currently considering and even provide the defenses with our best effort, we have reason to expect that there are (or will be) unconceived serious objections which we are currently not able to address. As Mizrahi puts it:

...the history of philosophical inquiry offers a straightforward rationale for thinking that there typically are serious objections to our best philosophical theories, even when we are unable to conceive of them at the time. (Mizrahi, 2014, p. 426, his italics)

If we admit that this is the case, then a straightforward response, as suggested by (P3*), is to suspend our judgement about the given philosophical thesis.

However, from the perspective of anti-skeptics, the inductive argument above is also self-defeating. Consider (P3*). According to the argument's own logic, we should expect unconceived serious objections to (P3*) and thus ought to suspend judgement regarding it. But this defeats the very inductive argument for meta-philosophical skepticism, as we are no longer justified in believing one of its core premises. Anti-skeptics argue that this objection can be generalized to all versions of arguments for meta-philosophical skepticism. Regardless of which epistemic principles skeptics invoke, if those arguments also prescribe suspending belief in those very principles, then the arguments fail to pose any real threat to our knowledge or justification with respect to philosophical claims.

Skeptics are aware of the problem and have offer their responses. Skeptics might try to argue against the self-defeat objection by stating that their skeptical arguments work in a *parasitic* manner. That is, skeptics themselves need not endorse the premises of their arguments. Rather, as long as the readers of those arguments are committed to the relevant premises, the force of the skeptical conclusion remains intact. I find this line of response unpersuasive. If the self-defeat objection reveals that skeptical arguments defeat themselves, then the rational response for readers is simply to refrain from believing those premises –regardless of any prior commitment they may have had before encountering the skeptical argument.

Another line of response holds that it is possible that the justification of premises in skeptical arguments is secured from being compromised by arguments themselves since the premises happen to be few justified philosophical claims. For instance, Brennan states that:

However, it may just be that a small set of philosophical issues is answered and that philosophical issues is answered and that philosophical methodology works reliably on a small set of issues, i.e., just in the areas needed to make the sceptic's argument. For instance, perhaps the sceptic needs probability, an account of the notion of an epistemic peer, some notion of reliability, and not much else. (Brennan, 2010, pp. 8-9)

Brennan's response is hardly convincing. One might reasonably ask what explains the reliability of the methodology invoked by the skeptic's account. If no explanation can

be provided, then Brennan's defense is explanatory unsatisfactory and *ad hoc*. On the other hand, if an explanation for the methodology's reliability is offered, then it must appeal to some methods or background account(s). However, if peer disagreement among philosophers is as widespread as (P1) suggests, then we should expect that there are peer disagreements concerning the reliability of the invoked method(s) and background account(s). In this way, the worry of self-defeat resurfaces, as Paár observes: "But if peer disagreement shows unreliability, then surely our method in answering the meta-level question of philosophy's reliability and the epistemic status of our philosophical theories is also unreliable". (2015, p. 32)

Ballantyne (2019) offers yet another line of response by reformulating the skeptical argument with the notion of partial defeater. In contrast to a full defeater which demands us to give up the target belief, a partial defeater only demands us to lower our confidence without fully relinquishing it. According to Ballantyne, it is possible that the skeptical argument defeats its own premise(s) only *partially*:

If the first-order evidence supporting our belief in the method is strong, then the competence defeaters may push down our confidence only a little. The method may call for some doubt about itself, but not enough doubt to properly eliminate our belief in it. (Ballantyne, 2019, pp. 254-255)

Ballantyne's partial defeater response faces two main problems. First, it weakens the force of arguments for meta-philosophical skepticism. Anti-skeptics can simply dismiss such argument by noting that they merely present *partial* defeaters that demand us to slightly reduce our confidence, while continued beliefs in philosophical claims remain epistemically reasonable. Second, why skeptical arguments merely present partial defeaters instead of full defeaters against their premises needs an explanation. If the explanation can be fully defeated by applying skeptical arguments, then the self-defeat objection creeps back since the epistemic possibility for skeptical arguments to be *full* defeaters against their premises is back in the picture.

Skeptics might attempt to deal with the self-defeat objection by drawing on prior discussion about conciliationism in the epistemology of disagreement, since the view faces a structurally similar self-defeat objection. According to conciliationism, one is rationally required to suspend judgement or reduce confidence in a proposition *p* when

confronted with peer disagreement. It is not difficult to see that such a view is self-defeating once we consider the situation where there is a disagreement about whether conciliationism itself is correct or not. Following the prescription of conciliationism, its advocate should suspend or reduce confidence in conciliationism itself. Namely, “your view on disagreement requires you to give up your view on disagreement” (Elga, 2010, p. 179). In what follows, I’ll briefly consider two conciliationists’ responses to this objection and evaluate whether they help skeptics in replying to the self-defeat challenge.

First, Elga argues that “in order to be consistent, a fundamental policy, rule, or method must be dogmatic with respect to its own correctness” (2010, p. 85). In other words, to maintain consistency, the relevant belief about the correctness of a method is exempt from being defeated by the method itself. Thus, in order to remain consistent, it is epistemically permissible for conciliationists to exempt their very thesis from being defeated by itself. By analogy, skeptics might claim that in order to preserve consistency, premises in skeptical arguments should also be exempted from being defeated by those very arguments.

Second, Pittard (2015) argues that regardless of how the conciliationist response, a commitment to conciliationism is preserved at some level. He illustrates this by distinguishing between belief-credence level and the reasoning level. He contends that if a conciliationist reduces the credence of the belief in the presence of a steadfast opponent, then although the commitment of conciliationism is violated at the belief-credence level by deferring to a steadfast opponent, however, the commitment is still preserved in the reasoning level. On the other hand, if a conciliationist stick to the thesis, then the commitment to conciliationism is violated at a reasoning level, and deference toward a steadfast view is demonstrated. But still, the commitment is preserved at the belief-credence level. Pittard concludes conciliationism is rationally committed to its very idea (although at a different level) either way. Similarly, skeptics can adopt Pittard’s strategy and argue that either refraining from believing premises (like (P1) or (P2) above) in skeptical arguments or continuously believing in them preserves the rational commitments to meta-philosophical skepticism.

I contend that both Elga’s and Pittard’s responses are unhelpful to skeptics here. One immediate follow-up question to skeptics that adopt Elga’s line of response is why

the preservation of consistency should be valued. It seems that nothing stops us from applying skeptics' arguments to cast doubt on the commitment of consistency preservation as a guidance principle for preservation/rejection of adopting a method or principle. From this perspective, the self-defeat objection re-emerges. And even if there's a way to elucidate why consistency preservation should be respected without being defeated by skeptical arguments, Elga's response is still problematic. There are many ways to preserve consistency when skeptics face the self-defeat objection. One way is to exempt premises in skeptical arguments from being self-defeated. The other is to reject these premises straightforwardly. So *why* must we favor exempting the argument from self-application if there are other moves for the sole consideration of consistency preservation? Framed this way, adopting Elga's strategy is ill-motivated. Adopting Pittard's line of response suffers a similar problem. If neither (1) refraining from believing premises of skeptical arguments according to the reasoning of these arguments themselves, nor (2) sticking with their beliefs about the premises and refusing self-application of the argument violates skeptics' commitment to their skepticism, then what reason is there to favor of (2) over (1)? Skeptics might want to seek for other conciliationists' responses to the charge of self-defeat in hope of resolving skeptics' own problem. I think the hope is dim. In its nature, while conciliationists' responses seek to establish a positive thesis still, however, skeptics seek to argue against all cases of philosophical knowledge and justification. This puts skeptics in a difficult position to uptake conciliationists' strategies without invoking further commitments in some epistemic principles which they should reject.

From the above discussion, we can summarize that these previous attempts to take up the self-defeat objection falls into a trilemma. First, these responses might *weaken* the force of skepticism when considerations like partial vs. full defeaters or consistency preservation are introduced—since philosophical claims that are relevant to these considerations should be granted as possessing certain form of justification. Second, if the invoked considerations can be challenged by skeptical arguments again, then the self-defeat objection returns. Thirdly, if the responses only make space that explain the epistemic permissibility of sticking to beliefs about premises in skeptical arguments along with other viable options, then the responses are again *ill-motivated* and *insufficient* to

retain the force of skeptical arguments without favoring of meta-philosophical skepticism non-arbitrarily. In sum, these recent attempts to tackle the self-defeat objection utterly fail.

Is meta-philosophical skepticism doomed due to the self-defeat objection? Not necessarily. In the following section, I'll introduce the notion of pragmatic justification and explain how such a notion can help skeptics to respond to the objection.

Pragmatic Justification in Rescue

Previously, the discussion of the self-defeat objection against meta-philosophical skepticism is heavily revolved around *epistemic* terminologies related to knowledge, justification, reliability, and rationality. Namely, what we should or shouldn't believe solely depends on whether it brings epistemic goods like rationality, understanding, or knowledge. Call such a position of belief evaluation as *evidentialism*. Its core principle is characterized by Feldman as follows: "When adopting (or maintaining) an attitude toward a position, p , a person maximizes epistemic value by adopting (or maintaining) a rational attitude toward p " (2000, p. 685). If, pace evidentialism, whether we should adopt a belief *only* depends on the expected epistemic values, then indeed the self-defeat objection poses a threat to meta-philosophical skepticism, as we should never rationally reach the intended skeptical conclusion via skeptics' arguments. But it is not always the case that a belief's justificatory status can be solely evaluated with epistemic values.

Recently, a series of works has defended the view that a belief can be justified *pragmatically*, even when the evidence available to the subject is insufficient or neutral to provide epistemic justification for it (McCormick, 2015, 2020; Rinard, 2021). Call this view *pragmatism* in belief evaluation. I shall say more on what pragmatic justification is about below.

There are several notable features of the notion of pragmatic justification. First, in contrast to epistemic-value-related notion like knowledge, truth, epistemic rationality, pragmatic justification is a notion that is more encompassing. According to Rinard, besides epistemic sense of "ought," there is a sense of "ought" that "takes into account all relevant considerations and is in that sense all-things-considered" (Rinard, 2021, p. 441). Sosa adheres and further states that "a belief can be epistemically irrational though rational all things considered" (2010, p. 34). Second, pragmatic justification is *guidance-giving* (Rinard, 2021, p. 441). Namely, it informs us what to do or believe as all-things-

considered reasons are balanced. Thirdly, I take that the pragmatic justification, in many cases, can be *partially indifferent* regarding various aspects. A belief can be pragmatically justified even if some (or many) relevant issues regarding its truth have *not yet* been fully settled. This feature in line with many of our ordinary epistemic and linguistic practices as Eklund in his discussion of ontology states that “even genuinely literal assertions have what we may call *non-serious* features, features that are not important to the point of the assertions, and among these features are normally the ontologically committing ones” (2005, p. 558). For example, Eklund make a case with the discussion of ontology of ordinary objects:

In the case of middle-size dry objects, suppose that the oracle tells us that a radical stuff ontology is correct (there are no objects but only stuff), or that mereological essentialism is correct, or that van Inwagen-style eliminativism (organisms are the only complex objects there are) is correct. In each case, I am as inclined to believe that we would ‘go on as before’ as I am inclined to believe this in the case of mathematics. Perhaps matters would stand differently if the oracle gave some other type of positive account of why there aren’t any middle-sized objects as we conceive them—that it is all a dream or that Berkeleian idealism is correct. But however, that may be, the general point stands. (Eklund, 2005, pp. 559-560)

In ordinary context, we won’t take assertion and belief of a subject that there are middle-sized ordinary objects to be irrational even if the subject has not yet believed in a well-established view in ontology or just is completely ignorant about the metaphysical disputes. Fourth, pragmatic justification is overall *consequential*. That is, whether a belief is justified in a pragmatic sense or not depend on the expected outcome of belief possession. But what exactly is the outcome that should be considered? Finally, following McCormick’s characterization, I suggest that the outcome should be about our general interests in having a flourishing life. The general interest mentioned here should be distinguished from merely instrumental or prudential interest (2020, p. 8608). While different individuals might have different personal aims and goals in different scenarios or situations, however, some states are, in general, desirable to most individuals. For instance, facilitation of communication, increase in the survival rate, conceptual clarity, etc. (Here, I’m open to the possibility that general interests can depend on both objective

(facts) and subjective (like a subject's beliefs) factors.) Summing up, we may understand a belief as being pragmatically justified as long as possessing it is to be expected to fit our general interests that lead to a flourishing life even if it lacks evidential support to a certain extent: "But if some beliefs that are integral to flourishing cannot be grounded in evidence and their truth-value remains indeterminate, this will not detract from their value". (McCormick, 2020, p. 8608)

Some might still think that the possibility of justifying a belief in a pragmatic sense sounds incredible. But there are plenty of cases where pragmatic justification best fits the explanation: "For example, many believe in God despite taking themselves to lack evidence. Or one may be sure that a friend of theirs is innocent, even if they acknowledge that the evidence suggests they won't succeed". (Rinard, 2021, p. 447) Or consider McCormick's discussion on Nozick's take on believing that his children are not automata:

[Nozick] says even if all the evidence available to him would be the same if his children were automata, so that he cannot know that his children are not automata, this does not undermine his belief that his children are not automata. (McCormick, 2020, p. 8604)

Of course, the cases above like believing god's existence, friend's innocence, or his children not being automata, judging from an evidentialist's perspective, are surely irrational. But this then ignore other aspects where we might still want to claim that these beliefs are somewhat reasonable. And if evidentialist's criterion is the only reasonable one for believe evaluation, then many of laymen's beliefs should probably be charged with irrationality as these beliefs are (from a philosopher's perspective) disappointedly and unsophisticatedly coarse-grained and can be easily defeated with various philosophical arguments. But surely charging that our ordinary beliefs are massively irrational is to a certain extent, undesirable. Adhering to this point, in their works, both McCormick and Rinard appeal to pragmatic justification to explain the rationality of laymen's beliefs about the external world. According to them, even if an individual fully endorses or cannot respond to arguments for external world skepticism, her beliefs about external world object like trees, people, furniture are still pragmatically justified.

Appealing to the notion of pragmatic justification, McCormick contends, can also partially explain why we think epistemic values related to truth, rationality, or knowledge

are important to us as they either direct or indirectly contribute to a flourishing life, as she says “by tying epistemic value to the practical, broadly construed, we can make sense of why epistemic norms have the force that they do” (2020, p. 8607). McCormick speculates that the normative force of epistemic reason and justification is ultimately based on pragmatic justification. Echoing McCormick, Rinard expresses some doubts about an autonomous realm of epistemic reason/justification as she says, “my own view is that putative epistemic sense of ‘should,’ ‘reason,’ ‘justified,’ and ‘rational’ are not in a good standing” (2021, p. 442). I do find both McCormick’s and Rinard’s view appealing. It seems true that why we care about epistemic reasons is indeed heavily motivated by varieties of practical considerations. However, whether there’s an independent realm of epistemic rationality in good standing does not need to be settled here. I’ll leave the issue for future research.

So, how does the pragmatic justification help meta-philosophical skeptics to deal with the self-defeat objection? I suggest that skeptics can explain how premises like (P2) in section 2 is upheld even facing the self-defeat charge by stating that we do have pragmatic justification to (P2) or similar principles. Consider the following scenario. Two sources of information are in conflict regarding the opening hour of the local library. Say Sam claims that it should open at 8 a.m. on weekday. But Emma disagrees and states that it should open at 9 a.m. on weekday. Suppose we don’t have any reason to discredit either Sam or Emma and there’s no pressure or immediate practical consequence if we do not decide which side is correct. It seems that it will be a pragmatically rational move to suspend our judgment for now. Here, we might formulate the principle that guide our consideration as:

(P) Suppose there’s no immediate practical consequences for belief suspension; we should suspend our judgement facing disagreement between equally reliable information sources.

Two things to be noted for the formulation of (P). First, the qualifier for “no immediate practical consequences for belief suspension” is intended to resemble the principles under the examination in philosophical activities where there’s no immediate harm or other bad outcomes would occur if judgement were not made in time. Second, my use of the term “reliable” should not be understood as the technical epistemic term. What I

suggest is that the term is understood in a more non-committal (or partially indifferent) way. That is, in our daily practices, before we have a more refined and stringent philosophical definition about what makes an information source reliable, we already possess some coarse-grained conception of what makes the source reliable (just to slightly formalize with some philosophical precision, think about a disjunction of features that we would associate with reliable source in our daily lives). One will immediately see that (P) is also self-defeating as it is possible that there are equally reliable sources disagree about whether (P) is true. However, even if this is the case, it should be hard to deny that in our daily practices, when we face disagreements, we'll appeal to (P) or other analogous principles to guide us. It is surely that (P) and analogous principles suffer from all kinds of issues if we examine them from a philosophically sophisticated perspective. But it can be hard to deny that at most of the circumstances, following (P) is still a pragmatically rational as it prevents us from the bad consequences with making hasty decisions. In the same vein, we can maintain our beliefs in (P), (P1), (P1*) as even though holding them invoke self-defeat in a more stringent philosophical sense. This is similar to how Rinard argues that individuals (what she refers to as Pragmatic Skeptics) can at the same time appreciate or even be convinced by arguments for external world skepticism but still possess beliefs about the external world as she describes that "Pragmatic Skeptics will exhibit systematic, ongoing diachronic inconsistency in their beliefs" (Rinard, 2021, p. 436). And meta-philosophical skeptics can safely appeal to premises like (P1) as a parcel of their skeptical argument and suspend their judgement on various philosophical theses.

Meta-philosophical skepticism in conjunction with the notion of pragmatic justification. Might still believe or assert claims about knowledge, justification, or reliability. But it should be kept in mind here that skeptics will believe or assert in a more partially indifferent or non-serious sense which does not commit to any philosophically sophisticated sense of truth or epistemic conditions.

While on behalf of skeptics, I argue for the possibility that premise(s) used in arguments for meta-philosophical skepticism can be rational in a pragmatic but *not* in an epistemic sense. I take it that one of the consequences of my defense is that it also retains the possibility for us to believe in some philosophical theses with practical justification.

That is, some philosophical theses can still be believed, albeit we lack sufficient epistemic justification. Like, even if some version of the principle of utility is still under extensive disagreement about its correctness among peer philosophers, under certain circumstances, subjects can still hold it as long as it happens to promote some of the general interests. I suggest that this is not a negative consequence.

Several clarifications should be made here. First, my view should not be conflated with a Moorean commonsense view. Indeed, under my view, a subject can hold many beliefs about commonsense with justification. While what I do commit to is that these beliefs enjoy pragmatic justification as having them contribute to a flourishing life for average human beings, I do not adhere to a Moorean view as such a view still attempt to explain the rationality of our beliefs about commonsense with epistemic values. Also, I take that it is possible for a subject to believe in some claim that is largely in conflict with commonsense as long as we have pragmatic reason(s) to believe in it. Second, Although the notion of pragmatic justification does share some similarity with epistemic notion of justification and knowledge under contextualist's framework (DeRose, 1995; Lewis, 1996), however, it possibly diverges from contextualism regarding, for instance, how notion like general interest should be understood. While contextualist would probably deny, I'm open to the possibility that there are some general interests that contributes to flourishing life in all contexts in an objective sense. Thirdly, my appeal to pragmatic justification is also distinct from Wright's view of epistemic entitlement (2004). According to Wright, it is rational to accept some propositions (what he called "cornerstone propositions") if these propositions are important to some of our cognitive projects. The acceptance here, he contends, should not be understood as beliefs since beliefs respond to evidence. Instead, acceptance should be understood as trust:

It is in the nature of trust that it gets by with little or no evidence. That is exactly how it contrasts with belief proper, and it is not per se irrational on account of the contrast. Entitlement is rational trust. (Wright, 2004, p. 194)

Wright's view can be criticized from the perspective of a phenomenological consideration. Phenomenologically, both laymen and we don't *just* trust but believe in the existence of external world. This renders Wright's view unsatisfactory regarding the explanatory lacuna regarding how we explain such a belief. Pragmatic justification, on the other hand,

scores much better as it both provides explanation and fits with the phenomenological adequacy. The meta-philosophical skepticism with pragmatic justification defended here should also not to be conflated with Pyrrhonian skepticism. Previously, Pyrrhonian skepticism is often charged to lead to an unlivable life since it “counsels’ radical suspension of judgment, which could, as Hume suggested lead to a potentially fatal inability to act” (Rinard, 2021, p.440). In contrast, with the notion of pragmatic justification, the rationality of our many ordinary beliefs is explained. In response to the worry that Pyrrhonism leads to an unlivable life, Frede (1980) argues that it is possible for Pyrrhonian skeptics to hold beliefs about “something evident, something that seems to him to be the case” (1980, 194) without commits to the truth of what is believed. Some might worry that this makes my view quite similar to a version of Pyrrhonian skepticism. While I think it can be an interesting issue to further look into, let me just point out there’s still a dissimilarity even if Frede’s defense is a plausible one. As Frede construe what Pyrrhonian can believe with what’s evident, in comparison, I suggest that the range of what meta-philosophical skeptics is wider as it includes what fits general interests. Noted that what fit general interest might not appear to be true or evident. I believe this makes my view more lenient regarding what we can rationally believe and better fit with our ordinary practices.

Conclusion

To summarize, the introduction of pragmatic justification enables meta-philosophical skepticism to sidestep the self-defeat objection. It allows for the possibility that one can be pragmatically rational in believing the premises of skeptical arguments, even if those arguments epistemically defeat those very premises. Pragmatically speaking, we are still justified in holding these beliefs and employing them in argumentation. In this way, the self-defeat objection, at least within the epistemic domain, is deflated. That said, at least two lingering questions merit further discussion. First, is there an independently grounded realm of epistemic evaluation with normative force, or is all normative force ultimately derived from pragmatic considerations? Second, if meta-philosophical skepticism is correct, what role remains for philosophy? Due to limitations of space, I leave these questions for future investigation.

References

- Alexander, J. (2012). *Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction*. Polity Press.
- Ballantyne, N. (2013). Counterfactual Philosophers. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 88(2), 368-387.
- Ballantyne, N. (2015). The Significance of Unpossessed Evidence. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 65(260), 315-335.
- Ballantyne, N. (2019). *Knowing Our Limits*. Oxford University Press.
- Beebee, H. (2017). Philosophical Scepticism and the Aims of Philosophy. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 118(1), 1-24.
- Bourget, D. & Chalmers, D. J. What Do Philosophers Believe? *Philosophical Studies*, 170(3), 465-500.
- Brennan, J. (2010). Scepticism about Philosophy. *Ratio*, 23(1), 1-16.
- Bryant, A. (2020). Keep the Chicken Cooped: The Epistemic Inadequacy of Free-Range Metaphysics. *Synthese*, 197(5), 1867-1887.
- Bueno, O. & Shalkowski, S. A. (2020). Troubles with Theoretical Virtues: Resisting Theoretical Utility Arguments in Metaphysics. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 101(2), 456-469.
- DeRose, K. (1995). Solving the Skeptical Problem. *Philosophical Review*, 104(1), 1-52.
- Elga, (2010). How to Disagree about How to Disagree? In T. Warfield & R. Feldman (Eds.), *Disagreement* (pp. 175-186). Oxford University Press.
- Eklund, M. (2005). Fiction, Indifference, and Ontology. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 71(3), 557-579.
- Feldman, R. (2000). The Ethics of Belief. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 60(3), 667-695.
- Frances, B. (2016). Worrisome Skepticism about Philosophy. *Episteme*, 13(3), 289-303.
- Frede, M. (1980). *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Gettier, E. (1963). Is Justified True Belief Knowledge? *Analysis*, 23(6), 121-123.
- Goldberg, S. (2013). Defending Philosophy in the Face of Systematic Disagreement. In D. E. Machuca (Ed.), *Disagreement and Skepticism* (pp. 277-294). Routledge.
- Grundmann, T. (2019). Why Disagreement-Based Skepticism cannot Escape the Challenge of Self-Defeat. *Episteme*, 18(2), 224-241.
- Kornblith, H. (2013). Is Philosophical Knowledge Possible? In D. E. Machuca (Ed.), *Disagreement and Skepticism* (pp. 260-276). Routledge.
- Kripke, S. A. (1980). *Naming and Necessity*. Harvard University Press.

- Lewis, D. K. (1996). Elusive Knowledge. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74(4), 549-567.
- Licon, J. A. (2019). Modest Meta-philosophical Skepticism. *Ratio*, 32(2), 93-103.
- Machery, E. (2017). *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds*. Oxford University Press.
- McCormick, M. S. (2015). *Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief*. Routledge.
- McCormick, M. S. (2020). Value beyond Truth-Value: A Practical Response to Skepticism. *Synthese*, 198(9), 8601-8619.
- Mizrahi, M. (2014). The Problem of Unconceived Objections. *Argumentation*, 28(4), 425-436.
- Mizrahi, M. (2016). Historical Inductions, Unconceived Alternatives, and Unconceived Objections. *Journal for General Philosophy of Science*, 47(1), 59-68.
- Paár, T. (2015). Disagreement, Self-Refutation and the Minority Report of the Meta-Skeptics. *Kriterion – Journal of Philosophy*, 29(3), 23-44.
- Paár, T. (2016). Meta-Skepticism, Experimentalism, Cartography: The Dead-Ends of Philosophy. In M. Gyöngyösi, Z. Kapelner, Z. Ádám & I. Faragó-Szabó (Eds.), *On What It Is: Perspectives on Metaphilosophy* (pp. 63-85). Philosophy Workshop of Eötvös József Collegium.
- Pittard, J. (2015.) Resolute Conciliationism. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 65(260), 442-463.
- Ribeiro, B. (2011). Philosophy and Disagreement. *Crítica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía*, 43(127), 3-25.
- Rinard, S. (2021). Pragmatic Skepticism. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 104(2), 434-453.
- Segal, A. (2024). Systematicity and Skepticism. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 64(1), 1-18.
- Sosa, E. (2010). *Knowing Full Well*. Princeton University Press.
- Wright, C. (2004). Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free). *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 104, 167-211.