

# HEALTHY SKEPTICISM AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores and articulates an alternative to the two main approaches that have come to predominate in contemporary philosophical discussions of skepticism. These we may call the 'Foil Approach' and the 'Bypass Approach' respectively. On the Foil Approach, skepticism is treated as a problem to be solved, or challenge to be met, or threat to be parried; skepticism's value, insofar as it is deemed to have one, accrues from its role as a foil contrastively illuminating what is required for knowledge and justified belief. On the Bypass Approach, skepticism is bypassed as a central concern of epistemology. In this paper, I articulate an alternative to both these approaches, one that explores when skepticism is healthy and when it is not. I call it the 'Health Approach' to skepticism.

KEYWORDS: skepticism, practical wisdom, knowledge, credence, doubt

"A healthy scepticism while in a car dealership will keep you from buying a 'lemon'. An unhealthy scepticism might prevent you from obtaining a reliable means of transport."  
Bill Shipley

Bill Shipley is right: sometimes skepticism is healthy, and sometimes it is not. As a biologist, he draws this distinction only in passing, preoccupied as he is with important matters of biological methodology.<sup>1</sup> His comment, however, is pregnant with practical wisdom concerning skepticism, much more so than he probably realized. A central aim of this paper is therefore to do some midwifery.

In light of this aim, I shall articulate an approach to skepticism that differs significantly from the two main overarching approaches to be found in contemporary epistemology. The first we may call the 'Foil Approach' and the second the 'Bypass Approach.'

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<sup>1</sup> With arguing, for instance, that causality in biology can be inferred from correlation without randomized experiments.

The Foil Approach has prevailed in much of epistemology since the rediscovery of the works of Sextus Empiricus in the sixteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Its adherents treat skepticism as a problem to be solved, or challenge to be met, or threat to be parried, or specter to be raised and dispelled, or heuristic opponent to be used.<sup>3</sup> They characterize skepticism's value, insofar as they deem it to have one, as accruing from its role as a *foil* contrastively illuminating what is required for knowledge and justified belief. As Duncan Pritchard notes, "it is in response to the problem of scepticism that most of the main currents of contemporary epistemology have been motivated."<sup>4</sup> And as John Greco argues: "skeptical arguments are useful and important because they drive progress in philosophy ... by highlighting plausible but mistaken assumptions about knowledge and evidence, and by showing us that those assumptions have consequences that are unacceptable."<sup>5</sup>

Whereas on the Foil Approach responding to skeptical challenges constitutes a (to some of its adherents *the*) central concern of epistemology, it does not on the Bypass Approach. Michael Williams encapsulates its spirit with his quip "that we

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<sup>2</sup> As Jim Stone has noted: "Epistemology is largely a response to skepticism. A subtext of virtually every theory of knowledge has been to show how knowledge is possible or, at the least, to avoid an account that delivers us unto the skeptic." (Jim Stone, "Skepticism as a Theory of Knowledge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60, 3 (2000): 537.)

<sup>3</sup> Some representative examples of such characterizations include the following: skepticism is treated as a problem to be solved in Keith DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," in *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, eds. Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 183-219, as a challenge to be met in Ruth Weintraub, *The Skeptical Challenge* (London: Routledge, 1997), as a threat to be parried in Laurence Bonjour, *Epistemology: Classic Problems and Contemporary Responses*, second edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), as a spectre to be dispelled in William Alston, "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach to Epistemology," in *Knowledge and Skepticism*, eds. Marjorie Clay and Keith Lehrer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 1-29, and as a heuristic opponent to be used in Keith Lehrer, *Theory of Knowledge* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 7. Pritchard adds: "In particular, sensitivity-based, safety-based, and attributer contextualist theories of knowledge all started out as antiseptical theories but are now theories of knowledge motivated on grounds that are independent of the problem of radical skepticism." (*Epistemic Luck*, 7.)

<sup>5</sup> John Greco, *Putting Sceptics in their Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2-3. Charles Landesman even thinks it "is no exaggeration to say that the philosophical topic that goes under the name of 'epistemology,' the effort to understand the nature and basis of human knowledge, has been propelled to a great extent by the loss of epistemic optimism caused by the skeptical revival." (Charles Landesman, *Skepticism: The Central Issues* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 71.)

get off the treadmill by overcoming the philosophical obsession with skepticism.”<sup>6</sup> Found primarily in naturalized epistemology, it “simply bypasses skepticism” as David Macarthur has put it, “when consistently pursued.”<sup>7</sup> Such naturalized epistemology comes in two main versions: a radical one and a moderate one. The radical version recommends replacing traditional epistemology (and the pride of place it accords to answering skeptical challenges) with the psychological study of cognition, whereas the moderate version recommends making use of psychology and allied sciences studying cognition to resolve epistemological issues.<sup>8</sup> Both versions, as William P. Alston characterizes them, decline to pursue epistemology as ‘first philosophy,’ and on both, “one approaches epistemology with the same ‘natural’ spirit as any other problem area – by working with any of our knowledge, beliefs, or assumptions that seem to be of relevance to the problem at hand; remembering that any of them can be called into question at a further stage of inquiry.”<sup>9</sup>

Their respective merits notwithstanding, both the Foil and Bypass Approaches have come at a significant opportunity cost, for in contemporary (in contrast with ancient) epistemology the relationship between skepticism and practical wisdom has garnered nowhere near the attention it deserves, even surprisingly in Virtue Epistemology where the Foil and Bypass Approaches have largely held sway.<sup>10</sup> The aim of this paper is to draw to it some deserved attention, *not* however by calling for a return to the suspension of judgment (or *epoche*) advocated by the Pyrrhonian *skeptikoi*, nor to the dogmatic denial of knowledge advocated by the

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Williams. Michael, “Coherence, Truth, and Justification,” *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1980): 272.

<sup>7</sup> David Macarthur, “Skepticism, Self-Knowledge, and Responsibility,” in *Aspects of Knowledge: Epistemological Essays*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (Oxford: Elsevier, 2006), 111.

<sup>8</sup> I am drawing here on the helpful overview of naturalized epistemology in Feldman (2010). Quine (1969) provides a paradigmatic example of a radical version of the Bypass Approach. Goldman (1992) provides a paradigmatic example of a moderate version.

<sup>9</sup> William P. Alston, *Beyond ‘Justification’: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Consider, for instance, the overview of the literature in Guy Axtell, “Virtue Theoretic Responses to Skepticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, ed. John Greco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 557-580. Interestingly, Robert Audi briefly adumbrates (but does not develop) a view akin to the one to be defended here characterizes what he calls “excessive skepticism” as too strong and “excessive credulity” as too weak a disposition to deny or withhold belief. See his *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 294. Also of interest are the essays in Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski, eds., *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) which pay scant attention to skepticism.

Academic *skeptikoi* of old.<sup>11</sup> It will do so rather by exploring when skepticism is healthy and when it is not.

For reasons that should become clear in what follows, our alternative may be called the ‘Health Approach’ to skepticism.<sup>12</sup> It does not call for categorically rejecting the Foil or Bypass Approaches, nor is it incompatible with holding that valuable work can and should be done by epistemologists who continue with those approaches. It does, however, open up another important avenue for epistemological investigation, one that merits consideration. So I hope to show in what follows.

## I. Some Clarifications

Before we begin our exploration, four clarifications are in order.

First, it will not be a concern of this paper to answer perennial skeptical challenges to our knowledge of the external world, or of other minds, or other such targets. Like the Bypass Approach, the Health Approach is *not* in the business of answering or responding to such challenges, and it presupposes that there is much that we know and have good grounds for believing. For instance, I know that I am writing this now, that there is an oak tree outside my window, that  $5 + 7 = 12$ , that you my reader exist, and the like. Unlike the Bypass Approach and like the Foil Approach, however, it does take skepticism to be a central focus of attention.

Second, the Health Approach presupposes that truth is objective at least in the minimal sense that believing something does not make it so, that something’s being true does not mean we believe it, and that we are capable of making mistakes.<sup>13</sup> Truth will be understood here in the basic Aristotelian way that what we believe (or say) is true if things are as we believe (or say) them to be, and false if things are not as we believe (or say) them to be.

Third, the Health Approach is in principle compatible with a variety of alternative accounts of knowledge and of justification (or positive epistemic status (PES) if one prefers a more neutral expression), and does not crucially turn on any

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<sup>11</sup> A compelling case can be made against such skepticisms, but I will not explicitly make that case here, although an implicit one against it can be derived from my discussion of healthy and unhealthy skepticism.

<sup>12</sup> I would have called it the ‘Virtue Approach’ but doing so would have been misleading insofar as it is not the approach that Virtue Epistemologists have heretofore adopted.

<sup>13</sup> This presupposition may strike some as platitudinous, and others (particularly relativists and postmodernists) as hopelessly naïve or benighted. For an excellent defense of the objectivity of truth in the minimal sense presupposed here and why it matters, see Michael P. Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

particular account of them.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, you will not find in this paper a new or distinctive account of knowledge or of justification. I shall leave these notions undefined, and in what follows you may ‘read in’ your preferred account when I use these terms.<sup>15</sup> Employing Wolterstorff’s distinction between analytic and regulative epistemology, the Health Approach falls squarely in the regulative camp.<sup>16</sup>

Fourth, I shall understand skepticism as an attitude whereby one denies that some claim (or set of claims) is known to be true or justifiably believed, and credence as skepticism’s attitudinal converse.<sup>17</sup>

## II. Immune Systems: Physiological And Doxastic

With the above clarifications in mind, we can begin our exploration. We will do so by taking a path not yet trodden in the epistemological literature; to wit, we will conceive of skepticism as playing the functional role of a *doxastic* immune system that protects the mind from false (or unjustified) beliefs, analogous to the way in which an organism’s physiological immune system protects it from antigens or harmful substances (such as bacteria, viruses, toxins, and malignant tissue). While having and maintaining a well-functioning physiological immune system is integral to the physiological health of an organism, so too is having and maintaining a well-functioning doxastic immune system integral to the doxastic health of one’s mind.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Provided, that is, that these accounts of knowledge or justification allow for the possibility of knowledge and justified belief and are compatible with truth being objective in the minimal sense presupposed here.

<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that I have nothing to say on these matters, but this is not the occasion. I develop and defend an account of knowledge in terms of epistemic security in my paper “Knowledge and Security” (a work in progress).

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff characterizes analytic epistemology as having the objective of producing accounts or theories of knowledge, justification, rationality, and so on, and offering definitions or analyses of these terms or concepts. Regulative epistemology, by contrast, aims to offer guidance for epistemic practice, and thus emphasizes the practical and social as opposed to theoretical challenges of interest primarily to epistemologists. (Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xvi.) See also R. C. Roberts and W. J. Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> My disjunctive expression “known to be true or justifiably believed” is not intended to equate knowledge with (mere) justified belief. Skepticism regarding justified belief is broader than skepticism regarding knowledge, but this distinction does not materially affect my main thesis.

<sup>18</sup> My contrast between physiological and doxastic immune systems does not turn on assuming a mind-body duality. I am not presupposing that the doxastic immune system is not in some

Immune systems, however, may malfunction by overreacting and by underreacting. We will consider both kinds of malfunction.

*Malfunctions of excess (or overreaction)* at the physiological level can occur when the immune system rejects inoffensive agents (such as pollen or cat dander as is the case with allergies) or the organism's own benign cells or tissue (as in the case with auto-immune diseases such as arthritis or multiple sclerosis). In such cases, the physiological immune system overreacts to non-threats to the detriment of the organism's physiological health. Analogously, a doxastic immune system can overreact by rejecting claims that are true (or justified) as false (or unjustified) or rejecting already held true (or justified) beliefs as false (or unjustified), and it does so to the detriment of the mind's doxastic health.

*Malfunctions of deficiency (or underreaction)* can occur at the physiological level when the immune system fails to eliminate detrimental foreign agents (such as viruses or microbes or toxins) or fails to eliminate the organism's own tissue or cells that have become malignant (such as cancerous tumors or lesions). In such cases, the physiological immune system fails to adequately protect the organism's physiological health. Analogously, a doxastic immune system can be deficient in failing to reject as false (or unjustified) claims that are false (or unjustified) or reject as false (or unjustified) already held beliefs that are false (or unjustified). In such cases, the doxastic immune system fails to protect the mind's doxastic health.

Given these analogies, entitling this paper "A Public Health Approach to Skepticism" would only be partly facetious, for there is much to be said in favor of regarding skepticism from a public health approach, one concerned not primarily with the physiological health of organisms but with the doxastic health of minds (although both can be intertwined). Analogous to how a physiological infection in one organism may spread to others, a *doxastic infection* in one mind may spread to others through the transmission and propagation of false or unjustified beliefs. And analogous to how physiological immune deficiency or excess in one organism may instantiate a more widely-distributed one in a given population, *doxastic* immune deficiency or excess in one mind may instantiate a more widely distributed one as well. The doxastic health of one mind may be intertwined with the doxastic health of others; hence, the allusion to a public health approach.

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sense or other physiologically grounded. I just draw the contrast to facilitate discussion. By 'doxastic health,' I mean a mind properly attuned to important truths about itself and its world, and generally capable of distinguishing such truths from falsehoods. I shall have to leave a proper discussion of doxastic health to another occasion.

Now, of course, every analogy is only partial. I acknowledge that the parallels between the physiological and doxastic immune systems only go so far, and there are important ways in which they differ. To give but one example, it is pretty clear that the physiological immune system is endogenous and functions autonomically without conscious deliberation and discernment; by contrast, skepticism (which, as you recall, I am characterizing as playing the functional role of a doxastic immune system) is as an acquired disposition or trait which typically involves conscious deliberation and discernment. Despite this and other differences, however, the parallels between them are striking enough to make for an illuminating analogy.

In keeping with this theme, then, let me offer some cases illustrating unhealthy and healthy forms of skepticism. The cases are by no means exhaustive, and there is significant overlap between them. They strike me as reasonably uncontroversial, and I hope they will strike you that way as well. We will begin by considering some cases of unhealthy skepticism, for, as in physiology and medicine, considering what is unhealthy can often give us insight into what is healthy. The cases we will consider do not involve fantastical philosophical thought-experiments that tax the imagination; all of them stem from the real world.

### III. Some Cases of Unhealthy Skepticism

As suggested with our analogy with physiological immune systems that can malfunction by excess (or overreaction) and by deficiency (or underreaction), so too skepticism as a doxastic immune system can malfunction by excess and by deficiency. We will consider examples of the former and then the latter.

#### III.a. Some Examples of Unhealthily Excessive Skepticism

1. *The Holocaust Denier.* Despite overwhelming evidence that the Holocaust occurred, the Holocaust Denier skeptically denies that one knows or justifiably believes that it did, and attempts via numerous publications and presentations to spread this skepticism to others.<sup>19</sup>

2. *The Parti Pris Partisan.* Fanatically devoted to her political party, the Parti Pris Partisan only listens to and reads the views of her own party and related media outlets, and skeptically denies the truth or justification of any alternative view that could call her own into question.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The infamous Ernst Zündel is a paradigmatic example of a Holocaust Denier.

<sup>20</sup> The shocking levels of ignorance and misinformation manifested at town hall meetings concerning the recent American health care debate provide telling examples of such unhealthy skepticism.

3. *The Conspiracy Theorist.* The leader of country C believes that the CIA has deliberately created AIDS to kill people in his country and continent, and that the use of anti-retroviral drugs is part of this plot to spread AIDS. He skeptically denies the truth or justification of alternative views, and blocks the implementation of AIDS prevention programs in his country. This results in hundreds of thousands of deaths that might have been prevented.<sup>21</sup>

*What These Cases of Unhealthily Excessive Skepticism Have in Common*

Despite differences in detail, notice that a pattern emerges from the cases above. In each, a skeptical attitude comes intertwined with an agenda (whether conscious or unconscious) inimical to genuine pursuit of the truth of the matter. This attitude in fact proves an impediment to its pursuit. In each case, moreover, the skeptic evinces a disregard or neglect of available evidence that might call into question views she antecedently holds. To generalize (though cautiously and tentatively), a salient characteristic of unhealthily excessive skepticism is that its denial that some claim is known to be true or justifiably believed comes untempered by a genuine desire to know the truth. If Aristotle was right that all men by nature desire to know, unhealthily excessive skepticism hinders its fulfillment.

In the cases given above, I have supposed that the skeptic is at least *sincere* (however misguided) in her skepticism.<sup>22</sup> Consider, however, the following two cases:

4. *The Obfuscatory Industrialist.* Despite mounting scientific evidence that substance  $\Omega$  produced by his company is harmful to non-human animals, humans, and even to the broader ecosystem, the Obfuscatory Industrialist skeptically denies that one knows or justifiably believes this is the case, and even attempts to fund controverting studies and promote their dissemination in the media, all the while cloaking his agenda in the disinterested garb of ‘scientific debate.’<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Readers will no doubt recognize that I’m alluding to Thabo Mbeki here. See W. M. Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2008) on this matter.

<sup>22</sup> Similar cases can be found where the supposed skeptic is not sincere. For instance, see the discussion of the historical work of David Irving and others in Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Plume, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> For real life examples of obfuscatory industrialists, see Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution* (Ewing: University of California Press, 2003). Peter J. Jacques (*Environmental Skepticism: Ecology, Power, and Public Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) offers a probing discussion of obfuscatory industrialism. Leah Ceccarelli (“Manufactroversy: The Art of Creating Controversy Where None Exists,” *Science Communication and Education*, Spring/Summer (2008): 82-84) offers interesting examples of what she calls “manufactroversy” or manufactured controversies. Other interesting discussions



5. *The Lazy Wannabe Sophisticate*. Wanting to appear intellectually sophisticated but without the hard work involved with carefully understanding and reasoning against position *P*, the Lazy Wannabe Sophisticate attacks *P* by trotting out blanket skeptical generalizations under the guise of intellectual rigor.<sup>24</sup>

In cases like this, the person professing skepticism is not sincere, and may in fact even believe what he professes to deny or reject. These pseudo-skeptics while not genuine skeptics themselves may nonetheless by duplicity (or pretense or bad example) induce others into unhealthy excessive skepticism. It is thus possible for unhealthy excessive skepticism to spread in a given population even though its original propagators are not genuine skeptics themselves.

We turn next to some cases of unhealthy deficient skepticism.

### III.b. Some Examples of Unhealthily Deficient Skepticism

1. *The Easy Seductee*. Because he is so very attracted to his Seducer, the Easy Seductee lets himself believe his Seductor's implausible assurances of love despite his better judgment.

2. *The E-mail Scamee*. Though it seems to her too good to be true, the E-Mail Scamee forks over her personal financial information to an alleged ex-government official in another country who promises her a share of \$10,000,000.

3. *The Evidence-Blind Father*. Despite the evidence being all around him that his daughter is a serious drug-addict, a father continues to accept his daughter's claims that everything is just fine and turns a blind-eye to ample countervailing evidence that she is in deep emotional and physical trouble.

*What These Cases of Unhealthily Deficient Skepticism Have in Common*

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of obfuscatory industrialists can be found in Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), and in David Michaels, *Doubt is their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Ralph Flewelling derided such lazy wannabe sophisticates as "loungers whose chief occupation is to lie in the easy chair of skepticism." (Ralph Tyler Flewelling, "The Easy Chair of Skepticism," *The Personalist* 4, 4 (1923): 226.) He caustically added: "Now for a man who desires to assume the importance of intellectual superiority without paying the price of intellectual superiority, skepticism offers the easy way. Just why should one take courage of confessed ignorance and disbelief has been a conundrum to most of us. Men are ordinarily glad to be classed with the knowers and doers, and why any man should erect his ignorance and laziness and boast of it, is surely past finding out. There is nothing so cheap as skepticism." (Flewelling, "The Easy Chair," 223.)

Though the particulars differ, notice that a pattern also emerges from the cases above. Whatever the cause (be it self-deception, naïveté, inexperience, or other), in each, the person in question evinces a deficiency of skepticism amounting to gullibility. Unlike those who exhibit unhealthily excessive skepticism, those who exhibit unhealthily deficient skepticism are receptive to believing; however, what they are receptive to believing is not so much what is true as what they want to be true. Thus, in its own way, the skeptical attitude evinced by those who manifest unhealthily deficient skepticism also comes intertwined with an agenda (whether conscious or unconscious) inimical to genuine pursuit of the truth of the matter, and also evinces a disregard or neglect of available evidence that might call into question views the person wants to hold. To generalize (though cautiously and tentatively once more), a salient characteristic of unhealthily deficient skepticism or gullibility is that its receptivity to believing comes untempered by a genuine aversion to falsehood.

Before we turn to cases of healthy skepticism, it is worth noting is that while the cases above may offer particularly glaring examples of unhealthily excessive skepticism and of unhealthily deficient skepticism, the manifestation of these attitudes is not an all or nothing affair, and each of us is susceptible to them to some degree or other with regard to some subject matter or other. Just as we should guard against the gullibility of unhealthily deficient skepticism, we should guard against the closed-mindedness of unhealthily excessive skepticism. Curiously, and somewhat paradoxically, it is also interesting to note that those who evince unhealthily excessive skeptical attitudes with regard to some claims often also tend to be gullible or insufficiently skeptical with regard to other claims that appear to confirm their antecedently held views.<sup>25</sup> Gullibility and closed-mindedness are often symbiotic.

Having considered some telling cases of unhealthy skepticism, we turn next to some cases of healthy skepticism.

#### **IV. Some Cases of Healthy Skepticism**

*1. The Careful Car Buyer.* While listening to the claims of the Used Car Dealer about the virtues of the various cars on the Dealer's lot, the Careful Car Buyer takes them with a grain of salt, and seeks out independent evaluations of the car she is considering buying.

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<sup>25</sup> As the recent American health care debate has shown us, some (though of course not all) of the very skeptics about the benefits of health care reform may uncritically believe in wild conspiracy theories involving death panels or the President having a Nazi agenda.

2. *The Determined Investigative Reporter.* Given its history of mendacity, the determined reporter doubts the veracity of her government's assurances that no war crimes took place in a conflict, and she investigates reports of massacres and attempted cover-ups.<sup>26</sup>

3. *The Judicious Leader.* Concerned that the consensus among his advisers may be the result of groupthink, the judicious leader holds off making a final judgment on Policy *P* until he has heard informed dissenting opinions that suggest other alternatives.<sup>27</sup>

4. *The Doubtful Scientist.* Despite its widespread acceptance, the Doubtful Scientist refuses to accept Theory *T* in light of the countervailing evidence she has found against it.<sup>28</sup>

5. *The Humble Scholar.* Though widely acclaimed for his brilliance and contributions to his field, the humble scholar takes the praise and acclaim in stride, all the while cognizant of his fallibility and considerable intellectual debt to others.<sup>29</sup>

*What These Cases of Healthy Skepticism Have in Common*

Notice how a pattern also emerges from our five cases of healthy skepticism. For despite the differences in detail, the skeptical attitude evinced in each case is not intertwined with an agenda inimical to the pursuit of truth of the matter. Quite the contrary, for the skeptical attitude serves as a spur, and not as an impediment, to further inquiry or investigation into the truth of the matter and into the evidence for or against a claim. To generalize (though cautiously and tentatively) once more, a salient characteristic of healthy skepticism is that its denial that some claim can be known to be true (or justifiably believed) comes tempered by a genuine desire to know the truth of the matter and an aversion to falsehood. Insofar as Aristotle was right that we have a natural desire to know, it is consonant with the fulfillment of this desire. And (as with unhealthy skepticism) the

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<sup>26</sup> The late Anna Politkovskaya's courageous reporting about human rights abuses in Chechnya provides a paradigmatic example of a determined investigative reporter. In fact, she exemplified how healthy skepticism and intellectual courage often go hand in hand.

<sup>27</sup> While the concept of groupthink had not yet been coined, Abraham Lincoln seems to have in effect taken measures to protect himself against it by assembling a team of rivals as his advisers. See Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> For example, Lavoisier's skepticism regarding phlogiston theory was not an end in itself but a spur to his theorizing about oxygen. Similar examples can be culled from the lives of such figures as Galileo, Newton, Pasteur, Darwin, Einstein, and many others.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, given his modesty and the skepticism he evinces concerning the acclaim his work has received, the great historian of China Yu Ying-shih provides a good example of a humble scholar. See [http://blog.nj.com/iamnj/2006/12/renee\\_carr.html](http://blog.nj.com/iamnj/2006/12/renee_carr.html).

manifestation of this attitude is not an all or nothing affair. Each of us probably manifests it to some degree or other with regard to some subject matter or other. Since healthy skepticism is presumably good for our doxastic health or well-being both individually and collectively, we ought to cultivate it in ourselves and in others. In this connection, we turn next to how healthy skepticism and credence are akin.

## V. How Healthy Skepticism and Healthy Credence are Akin

Since we have seen above how healthy skepticism guards against both gullibility and closed-mindedness, it is worth noting that while gullibility is a progenitor of ignorance, so too is closed-mindedness. For insofar as knowledge and ignorance are opposites, and insofar as belief is necessary for knowledge, to the extent that skepticism is corrosive to belief, it is corrosive to knowledge as well. Thus is closed-mindedness also a progenitor of ignorance. By contrast, healthy skepticism is interestingly akin to healthy credence: the latter like the former avoids gullibility on the one hand, and closed-mindedness or cynicism on the other. Both involve striving for a doxastic mean between such extremes that is integral, I submit, to practical wisdom in belief.

Such striving involves balancing the desire for truth with the aversion to falsehood. In relation to this point, consider what may seem at first blush an unlikely trio: romantic love, hypothesis testing, and hermeneutics.

*Romantic Love.* Those who have suffered the pain of a broken heart know how badly one can be hurt in love. One way of protecting oneself against such hurt is to be so chary in loving as to be closed to it. But such a reaction comes at the high cost of our potentially missing out on the delight and good of loving and being loved in return, and indiscriminate love by contrast risks considerable heartache. Similarly, while an unhealthily excessive skepticism may protect one from false belief, if it does so at the cost of the potential delight and good of knowledge, the cost will have been high indeed; and, while an unhealthily deficient skepticism may allow one to be receptive to truth, if it does so at the cost of undesirable and perhaps even dangerous falsehood, the cost will also have been high. Healthy skepticism and credence by contrast are like a prudent love, neither promiscuous nor closed to it either.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> To be sure, once one is in a genuine loving relationship, the attitude of credence will and should eclipse the attitude of skepticism. My point is applicable primarily to the pursuit and beginnings of a relationship of romantic love.

*Hypothesis Testing.* Ideally in hypothesis testing one wishes to avoid both false positives and false negatives. An obsession with avoiding false positives, however, may lead to accepting too many false negatives, and vice versa. Ideally, then, the risk of false positives in hypothesis testing ought to be balanced against the risk of false negatives.<sup>31</sup> So too, healthy skepticism and credence strive to temper the aversion to falsehood with the desire for truth.<sup>32</sup>

*Hermeneutics.* The literary critic enamored of the hermeneutics of suspicion may indeed succeed in ferreting out and rejecting objectionable assumptions and prejudices in literary works. But a hermeneutics of suspicion untempered by a hermeneutics of trust or openness is like a literary scorched earth policy, whereas a hermeneutics of trust or openness untempered by a hermeneutics of suspicion is like a policy of letting a thousand weeds bloom. Healthy skepticism and credence, like practical wisdom in literary criticism, tempers suspicion with trust and openness.<sup>33</sup>

To be sure, healthy skepticism and healthy credence are not identical; for, as understood here, skepticism involves denying that some claim (or set of claims) is known to be true or justifiably believed and credence is skepticism's attitudinal converse. We have seen however an important aspect in which they are interestingly akin, namely, how they involve tempering the desire for truth with the aversion to falsehood. Worth noting is another aspect in which they are akin, namely, that neither the doubt of healthy skepticism, nor the belief of healthy credence, is arbitrary. Healthy skepticism does not take doubt to be a default position such that claims are presumed false unless shown otherwise, but rather strives to ground doubt on good reasons; similarly, healthy credence does not take belief to be a default position such that claims are presumed true unless shown otherwise, but strives to ground belief on good reasons.

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<sup>31</sup> Of course, there may be good reasons in many cases to be more concerned with false negatives than positives (or vice versa).

<sup>32</sup> William James made a similar point (albeit in a different way and in a different context) in his response to what he saw as Clifford's scrupulous epistemology.

<sup>33</sup> I recognize that some literary works may call for much more of a hermeneutics of suspicion than a hermeneutics of trust (or vice versa). For an interesting discussion and overview of the hermeneutics of suspicion, see Brian Leiter, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud," in *The Future of Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 74-105. For an interesting discussion and overview of the hermeneutics of trust (especially concerned with the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur), see Robert Dostal, "The World Never Lost: The Hermeneutics of Trust," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47, 3 (1987): 413-434.

## VI. Healthy Skepticism as a Mean Between Extremes

While skepticism belongs primarily to the epistemic and not moral domain, it will not escape notice that the Health Approach to skepticism bears a number of similarities to Aristotle's treatment of moral virtues such as courage and temperance.<sup>34</sup> Courage requires avoiding the extremes of cowardice (which involves an excess of fear and cognate emotions) and foolhardiness (which involves a deficiency of fear and cognate emotions). Temperance requires avoiding the extremes of insensibility (which involves too much self-restraint with respect to bodily pleasures) and self-indulgence (which involves too little self-restraint with respect to the bodily pleasures). So too does healthy skepticism require avoiding the extremes of gullibility (a deficiency of doubt) and closed-mindedness or cynicism (an excess of doubt). Similar to how one may develop the traits of courage and temperance by striving to act with courage and temperance, so too may one develop the trait of healthy skepticism by striving to believe with healthy skepticism.<sup>35</sup> Parallel to how modeling oneself on, and learning from, the courageous and temperate may be conducive to becoming courageous and temperate oneself, so too modeling oneself on, and learning from, healthy skeptics may be conducive to becoming a healthy skeptic oneself. Akin to how the guidance of parents, relatives, friends, communities, and even one's broader society may be conducive to the inculcation and fostering of courage and temperance, so too may such guidance be to the inculcation and fostering of healthy skepticism as well. And inasmuch as practical wisdom is knowledge of how to live well, healthy skepticism instantiates a know-how integral to such wisdom as do courage and temperance in their own distinct ways. Skepticism, when healthy, is a mean between extremes of excess and deficiency. It is accordingly an epistemic virtue when healthy and vice when unhealthy. So too with credence.

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<sup>34</sup> In a brilliant recent article, Heather Battaly analyzes Aristotle's notion of moral temperance, and its corresponding vices of self-indulgence and insensibility. Using Aristotle's notion of moral self-indulgence as a model for epistemic self-indulgence, she argues that one can be epistemically self-indulgent, and that philosophers, especially skeptics, are likely candidates. While she does not draw a distinction between healthy and unhealthy skepticism, the skeptics she does envisage are what I would characterize as being of the unhealthy variety. See Heather Battaly, "Epistemic Self-Indulgence," *Metaphilosophy* 41, 1-2 (2010): 214-234.

<sup>35</sup> I do not here suppose that we have direct voluntary control over our beliefs, only that we have indirect voluntary control.

## VII. A Retropective and Prospective Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to articulate an alternative to both the Foil and Bypass Approaches to skepticism that currently prevail in epistemology. As we have seen, this alternative neither treats skepticism as a threat, nor ignores it as a distraction. Rather it takes skepticism, when healthy, to play the role of a doxastic immune system that functions well when it neither overreacts nor underreacts to the risk of error. Instead of taking skepticism to be antithetical to credence, the Health Approach takes both when healthy to instantiate practical wisdom. For skepticism, as George Santayana once sagely said, “is a discipline fit to purify the mind of prejudice and render it all the more apt, when the time comes, to believe and to act wisely.”<sup>36</sup>

To be sure, in exploring when skepticism is healthy and when it is not, I have focused on some relatively clear cases of each. There are of course questions that can and should be raised about cases that are less clear.<sup>37</sup> Take, for instance, those who refuse vaccinations for their children and who are skeptical about mainstream medicine on this matter. Are they exhibiting healthy or unhealthy skepticism? Take not cranks but those who think that there are legitimate grounds for doubting that human-released carbon is the key cause of climate change. Is their skepticism healthy or unhealthy? Other examples come readily to mind. Accordingly, for epistemologists willing to adopt it, the Health Approach to skepticism bears the promise of a program abounding in interesting and valuable inquiry into such real-world cases.

It also bears the promise of a program abounding in interesting and valuable theoretical inquiry. While my primary aim in this paper has been to articulate the Health Approach, this task has merely begun and not ended here. Important theoretical issues remain to be addressed in future work. To flag four (of which there are more) such issues:

(i) Insofar as healthy skepticism involves striving to ground doubt on good reasons, do alternative accounts of justification or positive epistemic status result in different conclusions concerning what counts as healthy skepticism?

(ii) Even if healthy skepticism involves tempering the desire for truth with the aversion to falsehood, are all truths equally worthy of being desired? Consider

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<sup>36</sup> George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith: Introduction To A System Of Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 69.

<sup>37</sup> Just as there will be grey cases for an Aristotelian account of courage, so too will there be for the account of healthy skepticism explored here. We would be wise, however, to follow Aristotle’s counsel to not seek more precision on such matters than there is to be had.

for instance an ogler or a gossip-lover. Each desires to know certain truths, but ones unworthy of being known. Given such cases, the account of healthy skepticism articulated here may need refinement in terms of desire to know truths worthy of being known.<sup>38</sup>

(iii) Healthy skepticism and healthy credence bear a number of affinities to such intellectual virtues as open-mindedness.<sup>39</sup> To what extent to these virtues overlap? Are they all species or manifestations of practical wisdom?

(iv) Insofar as healthy skepticism and credence require neither overreacting nor underreacting to the risk of error, might not insights from the field of risk management have valuable epistemological analogues?

In light of such questions and others, I do not doubt that the epistemic harvest is plentiful. I hope the laborers will not be few.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> This of course raises deep and difficult questions beyond the scope of this paper concerning how to draw this distinction.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance the treatments of open-mindedness in Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Wayne D. Riggs, "Open-Mindedness," *Metaphilosophy* 41, 1-2 (2010): 172-188; (2010), William Hare, "The Ideal of Open-Mindedness and its Place in Education," *Journal of Thought* 38, 2 (2003): 3-10, and Jonathan Adler, "Reconciling Open-Mindedness and Belief," *Theory and Research in Education* 2, 2 (2004): 127-142.

<sup>40</sup> Thanks to Heather Battaly, Ken Howarth, Rick Kamber, Karen Le Morvan, Matt Lund, and John Sisko for helpful comments and suggestions.