

SKEPTICISM ASIDE*

Catherine Z. Elgin

Harvard University

Descartes' demon is an irritatingly resilient little imp. Whenever a clever epistemologist threatens to disarm him, he feints, parries and reappears seemingly unscathed. I have not devised a way to permanently squelch him. I doubt that it can be done. But I will not argue for or even exhibit my pessimism here. Rather, I will urge that skepticism should be set aside. That is, I will argue for the practical necessity and epistemological utility of assuming that no skeptical scenario obtains. As I use the term, to *assume* something is to take it for granted. A *skeptical* scenario is one in which the world is radically, but undiscoverably, different from the way the evidence indicates that it is. I hope to show that for a variety of important epistemological projects, all that is required is the *assumption* that no skeptical scenario obtains. If I am right, then rather than confronting the problem of skepticism, it is sometimes epistemologically reasonable and responsible simply to set it aside.

Skepticism is an odd philosophical problem, for there are no skeptics. There are materialists and dualists. So we need to consider whether the arguments for materialism or for dualism are compelling. There are

essentialists and existentialists. So we need do consider whether essence precedes existence or vice versa. And so on. As philosophers, we standardly take ourselves to be obliged to confront positions that someone holds or could reasonably hold. But we cut our teeth on skepticism, and keep returning to it, despite the fact that no one is, and if Hume is right, no one could for any sustained period of time be, a skeptic. It is as though we say, ‘Look, it’s strictly unbelievable. But does that make it wrong?’

Skepticism is often treated as the endpoint of a continuum. As standards for epistemic acceptability rise, they become increasingly hard to satisfy. The higher the standards, the less we know. At the limit, epistemic standards are so demanding that we know (virtually) nothing. Skepticism results.¹ If this is so, skepticism can be blocked only by somehow stopping short of the limit. The tricky question is where to apply the brakes. I suggest, however, that this construal is incorrect. Skeptical scenarios differ significantly from ordinary high-standards scenarios. If I am right, skepticism is an isolated problem rather than being continuous with ordinary epistemic practice.

Let us begin with a familiar epistemological principle:

(R) An epistemic agent *S* ought not believe or accept that *p* unless her evidence, reasons or other grounds rule out the relevant alternatives to

p. If her resources do not equip her to rule out a relevant alternative, she should either (a) suspend judgment or (b) get the additional evidence or other support needed to settle the case.

Epistemologists disagree about what resources she can draw on. Empirical evidence, coherence considerations, reliable mechanisms, fit with past practice, and intuitions have been held to make a contribution. For my purposes, such disagreements are unimportant. Let us call the considerations that provide epistemic support for a belief, whatever they are, *reasons*. On this usage, an agent's reasons may include considerations that she is unaware of, such as the reliability of the mechanisms that generate her perceptual beliefs. Epistemologists also differ over the range of alternatives she must rule out. Since my goal is to investigate the differences between skeptical and non-skeptical scenarios, I shall take it that skeptical alternatives are neither always relevant nor always irrelevant.

My reason for formulating (R) in terms of relevant alternatives is strategic. This formulation provides a simple way to distinguish between skeptical and non-skeptical scenarios. In non-skeptical scenarios, we do not take all alternatives to be relevant. To arrive at a diagnosis, for example, a physician has to rule out all but one of the medical conditions that present a given cluster of symptoms. Those conditions are, in a clinical setting, the

relevant alternatives. The physician need not, however, rule out skeptical possibilities since they are medically irrelevant. Were the scenario a skeptical one, both malevolent demons and vitamin deficiencies would need to be excluded before a diagnosis of adrenal malfunction could be made. The distinction between the two scenarios seems worth marking, and the device of relevant alternatives enables us to draw the line. Nothing directly follows about how the criterion of relevance operative in a given context bears on the epistemic standing of a claim.

Underlying principle (R) are the virtually platitudinous convictions that (1) epistemically justified or warranted commitments are supported by reasons, (2) the reasons offered in support of a commitment can be better or worse, and (3) a commitment backed by sufficiently good reasons is epistemically acceptable.

Consider an ordinary epistemic predicament: Inspector Hound wants to know who stole the spoons. Since the relevant alternatives are the people who had the motive, means, and opportunity to commit the crime, the only suspects are the scullery maid and the butler. The available evidence implicates them equally. As things stand, Hound cannot responsibly conclude that the butler did it. In his current epistemic circumstances, he should suspend judgment. To solve the case, he needs more evidence. It is

in principle possible for him to get more evidence, and it is reasonably clear what sort of evidence he needs. So there seems to be no epistemological barrier to his eventually discovering the culprit. Once he learns, for example, that the maid has an unbreakable alibi, she is exonerated. Then he can responsibly conclude that the butler stole the spoons.

Although they may initially seem to take the same form, skeptical arguments turn out to differ significantly from situations like Hound's. Consider a case where a skeptical alternative is relevant. Fox wants to know whether (p) Sam is playing a bassoon. He has what he and pretty much everyone else take to be plenty of good reasons for thinking that Sam is playing a bassoon. He is inclined to believe or accept that Sam is playing a bassoon on the basis of those putative reasons. But Fox would be in exactly the same subjective state if q were the case, where q is the skeptical alternative that a malevolent demon is manipulating Fox's disembodied mind to produce in him the mental states he would have if he were an embodied person interacting with a material world as it seems to him that he does. That is why it seems to him that Sam is playing a bassoon.

By principle (R), if Fox is faced with incompatible alternatives p and q , and cannot rule out that q , he is not justified in believing that p . Standardly, an epistemic agent selects among competing alternatives by

adducing reasons that support one over the others. If the reasons at hand are not sufficient, it is often open to him to get more. But faced with a skeptical alternative q , he can neither rely on the available reasons nor garner the additional reasons he needs. Since there is no possibility of coming up with such reasons, the availability of a skeptical alternative requires permanently suspending judgment.

By hypothesis, the skeptical alternative is, to *all* epistemically accessible appearances, indistinguishable from its non-skeptical counterpart. So it is pointless for Fox to adduce further reasons. No matter how good his reasons or how plentiful his evidence, it makes no difference. But if this is so, then no matter how bad his reasons or how sparse his evidence, it makes no difference either. Bad reasons are no worse than good ones. The epistemic situation of the scrupulous, meticulous investigator is no better than that of the careless, biased question-beggar.

This might be doubted. After all, one might think, the interconnected, systematically supported beliefs of the scrupulous investigator form a mutually reinforcing network which must make them better than the isolated, fragmentary beliefs of the cavalier question-beggar. Even if neither of them can know, one is inclined to think, surely the scrupulous investigator is epistemically better off. The problem is that the connections that

allegedly enable the scrupulous investigator's beliefs to form a mutually supportive structure are suspect. Because a skeptical scenario is one of rampant, undetectable error, in such a scenario evidence must be considered misleading, seemingly secure connections unreliable, reasons spurious. Correlations are undependable, for generalizations hitherto borne out by experience must be considered accidental. The relations that apparently obtain among beliefs and other epistemic commitments within a subject's corpus are untrustworthy. A skeptical alternative thus neutralizes reasons. It renders them inert. With his reasons neutralized, Fox has no basis for believing that Sam playing a bassoon. He also has no incentive to gather more data or improve his methods for determining such things. Indeed, whatever new information he comes up with, and whatever methods he uses to acquire it, he has no reason to think that he has more evidence or improved methods. By neutralizing reasons, a skeptical argument disengages the mechanisms of epistemic evaluation.

It is relatively easy to concede that the skeptical challenge demonstrates that Fox does not *know*, or is not justified in believing, that Sam is playing a bassoon. And it is relatively easy to concede that the argument generalizes, so that Fox does not know or reasonably believe (much of) anything. But suspending judgment – really suspending judgment

– may be harder than it looks. For beliefs do more than represent the world; they also bear on and underwrite action.

Belief is complex. It involves both representing things to be a certain way and taking that representation to afford a solid basis for inference and action. It is worth prizing these aspects apart. L. Jonathan Cohen does so by distinguishing between what he calls belief and acceptance. I want to use his distinction. But because epistemologists standardly use the term ‘belief’ for the entire complex (and because I have been using ‘belief’ in just that way), I shall label what Cohen calls ‘belief’ *opinion*. So rather than distinguish between belief and acceptance, I shall characterize Cohen’s distinction as holding between opinion and acceptance. Opining that p is, as he says, ‘a disposition, when one is attending to issues raised, or items referred to, by the proposition that p , normally to feel it true that p and false that *not-p*.’² Opinion then is a psychological disposition to take things to be as the opinion-content says that they are. Acceptance is a willingness to use such a content as a basis for action or as premise in assertoric reasoning. (That is, reasoning in which the premises are treated as assertions. Such premises are put forth as true, not merely hypothetically or for the purposes of a reductio.) Acceptance is not a disposition to represent, but a disposition to act. To a large extent, of course, opinion and acceptance

coincide. We opine much that we accept and accept much that we opine. Still, it pays to distinguish the two, not only because there are exceptions to this generalization (for example, we sometimes accept as a working hypothesis something we do not fully opine), but also because opinion and acceptance function differently. Acceptance is action oriented in a way that opinion, per se, is not.

The question is whether the suspension of judgment that figures in (R) is a suspension of opinion or a suspension of acceptance. Construed as suspending opinion, suspending judgment is a matter of refraining from feeling that p is true and refraining from feeling that $not-p$ is true. Construed as suspending acceptance, it is a matter of refraining from taking either p or $not-p$ as a basis for assertoric inference or action. It is not clear that suspending opinion is something one can do at will.³ Even if I recognize that it is irrational for me to opine that crickets are dangerous, it may be that I cannot help but feel that they are. It seems that I cannot divest myself of this opinion merely by telling myself to do so. Perhaps by attending to the lack of warrant for my opinion, I can sow in myself seeds of doubt and gradually bring it about that I don't quite *opine* it any more. So even if a mere act of will is insufficient, there may be a way for me to unseat my opinion. In any case, for my purposes it does no harm to assume that

suspension of opinion is possible, so I shall make that assumption. Suspending acceptance is plainly under my voluntary control. If I recognize that my opinion is irrational or unfounded, I can refrain from acting on it and from using it in assertoric inferences.

In some cases, of course, both sorts of suspension are entirely reasonable. Since we will never be in a position to know, reasonably opine, or reasonably accept that

(v) The number of stars is even,

we can and should suspend judgment over whether v is so. Doing this is unproblematic, since withholding opinion and acceptance is relatively uncostly here. Not much else that we are inclined to think or do is undermined by our refraining from feeling that or acting on v . In other cases, the price is higher. If Inspector Hound cannot eliminate either suspect, the case of the stolen spoons will never be solved, both parties will remain under suspicion, and the prospects of recovering the spoons will be considerably diminished. Moreover, our understanding of the theft, its causes, circumstances, and consequences, will remain sparser than we would like it to be. Unfortunate though this is, it is epistemologically unproblematic. But to assume that such cases afford an avenue for generalizing to global suspension of belief *is* problematic.

Both ancient skeptics and Hume took it that skepticism involves globally suspending belief.⁴ Ancient skeptics believed that doing so was possible. They took it that belief involves a commitment about how things really are. They maintained that one could forego beliefs entirely and live solely at the level of appearances. Hume denied the possibility of living without belief.⁵ The skeptical stance, he maintained, is inherently precarious and short-lived. I am not at all confident that the position of the ancient skeptics can be sustained, even if construed as pertaining to opinion. But rather than argue against it directly, I want to look at the problem of acceptance. If we withhold acceptance of a contention, we refrain from incorporating it or its negation into our reasoning as an assertoric premise, and refrain from using it or its negation as a basis for action. Sometimes this is a good idea. But to do it across the board would be to forego reasoning and action entirely. Globally suspending acceptance is not just a bad idea, it is practically impossible.

Action requires assuming that things are one way or another. An agent performs act *a* because she wants to get *b* and takes it that by *a*-ing she will get *b* or improve her prospects of getting *b*. Her taking need not be a matter of full-fledged opinion. She might not quite feel it true that by *a*-ing she will get *b* or improve her prospects of getting *b*. So she may not opine

that by *a*-ing she will get *b* or improve her prospects of getting *b*. But she has a cognitively pro attitude of some degree of strength in that direction. Her taking is, moreover, embedded in a background of opinions, acceptances, and perhaps other cognitively pro attitudes having to do with the situation, the alternatives, and their foreseeable consequences. Her attitude toward the efficacy of *a*-ing is based on background opinions about the way things are, and background acceptances of these opinions as sound. If she wants to buy bread, she goes to the bakery, since she accepts that bakeries are the sorts of places that are likely to sell bread. This acceptance is sustained by a wide cluster of acceptances pertaining to stores, food, commercial transactions, past grocery shopping experiences, and so on. If she were to suspend acceptance of the members of that cluster, she would have no more reason to go the store than she had, for example, to climb a tree, compose a fugue, or howl at the moon in order to get bread. If she were to globally suspend acceptance, she could not act. She would be bereft of agency; for reasons, beliefs, and inferences are integral to action. She would, of course, still be capable of responding to stimuli. But the explanation of her responses would be purely causal. She would be behaving, but not acting, for there would be no reason why she did whatever she did.

If the undefeated skeptical alternative q undermines Fox's grounds for accepting that p , why shouldn't Fox either accept the disjunction p or q , or simply opt for q rather than p ? Hound might be remiss in concluding that the butler did it if the evidence tells equally against the maid, but he is certainly within his rights to conclude that either the butler or the maid did it, hence to orient himself toward the future on the assumption that one of them is the culprit. This might, for example, involve being sensitive to suspicious behavior on the part of the butler and the maid but ignoring, as irrelevant, similar behavior on the part of the gardener, who has already been exonerated. Hound might also take each disjunct separately as a working hypothesis, and see, on further investigation, which hypothesis is more strongly supported. The problem for Fox is that a skeptical scenario provides no orientation toward the future. If a malevolent demon is manipulating his mind, there is no reason to suppose that the regularities he takes himself to have observed so far in fact obtain, or (if they do) that they will continue to obtain. So even if, for example, his past experience provides Fox with ample evidence that if Sam seems to blow, his bassoon will seem to emit a noise, the demon might decide henceforth at random intervals to make it seem to sprout flowers or recite the Gettysburg address or take on the appearance of a frog. In a skeptical scenario, all regularities must be deemed

accidental. There is no reason to believe that they will continue to obtain.⁶

This means that Fox cannot feasibly take the skeptical scenario as a working hypothesis, not because the hypothesis is extreme, but because it is indefinite. It portends nothing in particular about the future. That being so, a skeptical scenario cannot provide a basis for action. Action involves a choice among alternatives. A skeptical scenario affords no basis for choice. So the effect of a skeptical argument is not to provide additional alternatives, as the introduction of the case against the maid provides an alternative to the hypothesis that the butler stole the spoons. It is to show that any choice is arbitrary. If we cannot accept causal inferences, inductive reasoning, the bearing of evidence on hypotheses, and so on, then *a*-ing in order to get *b* is arbitrary. We have no reason to think that it will work.

Ancient skeptics realized this. They did not think that one could live one's skepticism, if that meant suspending acceptance. Rather, they advised (as Descartes did later, and as Hume thought was inevitable) that we simply act on whatever it is we happen to believe, recognizing all the while that our beliefs are unjustified. If we cannot suspend acceptance, we can at least refrain from endorsing our acceptances. Our second-order attitudes then have no bearing on our first-order ones. This makes skepticism idle – not in the sense of being trivial, but in the sense of being, like an idling engine,

disengaged.

Disengagement, however, may be the least of our problems. Acting on whatever one happens to believe is not always a good policy. Whether it is depends on what one happens to believe. Someone who believes that tobacco is not addictive, and therefore takes up smoking, acts unwisely. Even if undefeated skeptical alternatives show that she does not strictly *know* that her belief is false, this does little mitigate the criticism of her. Nor is the policy of acting in accord with the practices of one's community, rather than on the basis of idiosyncratic beliefs, always an improvement. This too may be a good or bad policy, depending on the practices of the community. There are Ecuadorian Indians who, like generations of their forebears, cook in pots made of clay containing high levels of lead. The practice is deeply entrenched. Nevertheless, it would be a tragic mistake for a member of the tribe to continue the practice on the grounds that undefeated skeptical alternatives show that she does not *know* that eating food cooked in these pots causes neurological damage, and that using such pots is a longstanding practice of her tribe. The problem is not that she is uninformed about the danger. We may suppose that the World Health Organization has provided her with reams of relevant information. But the undefeated skeptical alternative deprives that information of credibility.

Having no reason to credit that information, she has no reason to cook any differently from the way her ancestors did.

The problem is vivid in cases of tragically mistaken acceptances and practices based on them. But it also occurs in seemingly benign cases. The World Health Organization physicians can act on the basis of their data on the grounds that doing so accords with the practices of the medical community, but no more than the Ecuadorian Indians have they any reason to do so. So long as the skeptical alternative is relevant and undefeated, all acceptance is groundless.

Kant's distinction between autonomy and heteronomy enables us to locate the source of the difficulty.⁷ An autonomous agent acts on laws that she gives to herself, hence on laws that she can on reflection endorse.⁸ A heteronomous subject acts on whatever inclinations she happens to have. She is, Kant contends, unfree, because she lives at the mercy of her inclinations. But if a subject is unfree because she acts on the basis of inclinations that she cannot on reflection endorse, she should be equally unfree if she acts on the basis of beliefs that she cannot on reflection endorse, for beliefs and desires (or inclinations, as Kant calls them) jointly underwrite action. That is precisely the position the skeptical argument seems to leave her in. Because she has not eliminated the skeptical

alternative, her beliefs are groundless. As a practical matter she cannot globally suspend belief. So the epistemically heteronomous subject has factual beliefs that frame her choices and beliefs about the methods, powers and resources at her disposal. But these beliefs are just ones she finds herself with, not ones she has any reason to trust. Although she finds herself believing that on previous occasions she has bought bread at the bakery, and finds herself inclined to go to the bakery to buy bread, she has no reason to accept that her beliefs about her past experience have any bearing on her current choice. She might, of course, go to the bakery anyway, since that is what she is most inclined to do. And her past experiences might influence her decision. But she can endorse neither her action nor the influence of her past experiences on her action. They are just things that happen to her. She is under the sway of whatever arbitrary choice-making mechanism happens to be in effect. She finds herself inclined to do this or that, and does whatever she is most inclined to do. But being at the mercy of her inclinations and their influences, she has no authority over the process or its outcome. Behaving in accord with whatever beliefs she happens to have, or living in accord with the practices of whatever community she happens to belong to is epistemically on a par with flipping a coin.

Still, she accepts some second-order claims that bear on first-order

views. To accept a second-order claim is to be disposed to treat it as a basis for assertoric inference or action, that is to be disposed to think or do something about the first-order considerations it bears on. Suppose, she accepts the second-order contention

(S) r is a reason for t .

Then she is disposed to treat r as a reason for t . This may involve being more inclined to believe, opine, or accept t in view of her acceptance of r , than she would be to accept t in the absence of any commitment to r . But this cannot be the whole story. For there is a difference between taking r as a *reason* for t and merely taking r as a factor that increases one's inclination to accept that t . If she accepts that r is a reason for t , then she takes it that *ceteris paribus* r *should* weigh favorably in her epistemic assessment of t . Whether or not she is in fact more inclined to accept t in view of her acceptance of r , by her own lights, she should be. Reasons for action are considerations that favor the actions they bear on, not just influences that prompt one to act.

Perhaps our apparent reliance on reasons is a chimera. Perhaps we are merely self-deluded pawns in the hands of a malevolent demon. This could be so. Nonetheless, we think that we act, and indeed cannot do otherwise. Life presents itself as a series of choices, often forced choices. So whether

or not we *really* act (in some metaphysically robust sense of ‘really’), we accept that we act. That is, we take the contention that we act as a basis for assertoric inference and for action. In so doing, we accept that we have reasons; we act as if we do. But to treat something as a reason makes it, for all practical purposes, a reason.

Does this just push the difficulty up a level? If a subject’s acceptance of (S) is heteronomous, she is still at the mercy of her inclinations – not her first-order inclinations, but her inclinations to treat some things as reasons for others. Clearly second-order heteronomy is no more palatable than first-order heteronomy. Seeking to solve the problem by appeal to third-order considerations, which give her reason to accept certain second-order considerations, which give her reason to accept certain first-order considerations, sets off a disastrous regress. So the question is whether there is any other way to vindicate second-order considerations.

Again, it pays to look to Kant. One formulation of the Categorical Imperative has it that those maxims are acceptable that an agent can endorse as a legislating member of the Kingdom of Ends. These maxims are not only laws that the members of the Kingdom of Ends are subject to, they are laws that the members of the Kingdom of Ends *make themselves* subject to. On Kant’s view, in the moral realm, legislators enact the laws that bind

them. I suggest that the same holds in the epistemic realm. What gives certain second-order claims their authority is that they express standards, rules, or principles that epistemic agents can on reflection endorse. Thinking of ourselves as reasonable and rational, we are prepared to accept those second-order considerations as specifying the constraints on what is good in the way of belief.

For our purposes two aspects of the Kingdom of Ends formulation deserve notice. One is that there are multiple members of the Kingdom of Ends. The Kingdom of Ends is not really a kingdom; it is a commonwealth. Because legislation is enacted only with the agreement of other members of the legislature, the laws of the Kingdom of Ends must be laws that the members can justify to each other. Enacting the epistemic standards that bind us is a collective endeavor. The other is that maxims are accepted on reflection. Kant considers ethical reasoning largely a priori. That is no part of my position. As I see it, to determine whether a statement, rule, standard or method is epistemically acceptable is to assess it in light of relevant epistemic ends, means, resources, pitfalls and so forth. The question is whether it is in reflective equilibrium with our other epistemic commitments. Whether a consideration is acceptable depends on what else is deemed acceptable. So acceptability is keyed to epistemic circumstances.⁹

One might wonder why we should consider ourselves only *legislating* members of a commonwealth of cognitive ends rather than, as it might be, philosopher kings, each capable of issuing epistemic edicts on her own. Consider the situation of such a solitary legislator, Lex. Certain epistemic principles bind him because he considers it reasonable that he, as an epistemic agent, be bound by them. Lex has no grounds for thinking it reasonable for him to be bound by epistemic principles that it would not be reasonable for others to be bound by. And having no grounds for thinking that different principles should apply to different agents, he cannot on reflection think it. He thus believes that the principles that reasonably regulate his epistemic practice ought to regulate the epistemic practice of others. But other epistemic agents should be bound only by principles that they can on reflection endorse. So Lex's belief that others should be bound by the principles he endorses is true only if others can endorse those principles. By his own standards then, he ought to endorse only such principles as others can reflectively endorse as well. Even if he starts out aspiring to be a philosopher king, Lex turns out to be a member of commonwealth of epistemic ends.

This has its benefits. Setting skepticism aside (or, indeed, refuting skepticism) does not determine what we should believe, or what criteria

determine what we should believe. It merely enables us to assume that reasons are engaged, so the epistemic situation of the scrupulous, meticulous investigator is better than that of the cavalier, biased question-beggar. This does not determine how we tell what makes for a scrupulous, meticulous investigation or how it differs from cavalier, biased question-begging. It notes that each of us has certain second-order commitments that she takes to bear on the acceptability of certain first-order views. But it does not say that these second-order commitments in fact constitute or define good reasons. Some of them probably do not. If reasons are engaged, we have both the opportunity and the obligation to figure out what second-order considerations are, upon reflection, ones we should endorse. By construing ourselves as joint legislators, we control for idiosyncrasy or bias, gain access to a wider range of perspectives and talents, and increase the possibility that unwise endorsements will be recognized, and revised or rescinded. That is, we considerably expand the range of epistemic resources we can draw on. The epistemic commonwealth is more powerful than the philosopher king.

The first person perspective is a perspective of agency. We act for what we take to be reasons and we assess (or at least take ourselves to assess) both our actions and our reasons. Nor is this assessment idle. Sometimes, it seems, on the basis of our putative assessments we modify

courses of action, reasoning strategies, or standards for how reasons should relate to choices. That is to say, we subject our actions to scrutiny, and act on considerations that on reflection we endorse. We do not, of course, subject every action to stringent tests. But in acting (even in acting unthinkingly) we take ourselves and our options to be located in a conceptual space where reasons are relevant, where considerations can be brought to bear to assess alternatives. Kant maintains that action requires considering ourselves free, that is capable of acting on laws we set for ourselves.¹⁰ His concern is the threat posed by determinism. But arbitrariness is equally threatening. If there are no stable connections between beliefs, desires, preferences, and actions, if we are pawns in the hands of a capricious demon, no course of action is better than any other. If we believe that this is our situation, we have no basis for choice. But, Kant notes, we cannot help but act, cannot help but choose, hence cannot help but consider ourselves free.

To consider ourselves free involves taking ourselves to have reasons for what we do. A reason for an action is a consideration that favors that action. To take a consideration to favor an action is to evaluate the action positively in light of that consideration. This requires thinking that the consideration is relevant to the action and that its holding increases the

action's desirability or prospects of success. Acting for a reason thus involves being and taking oneself to be moved by a consideration because it favors the action. This is possible only if the consideration and its relation to the action are subject to assessment. Such an assessment requires that we have grounds, and requires that we think they are good grounds. That is to say, to act for a reason is to act on the basis of a consideration that we can on reflection endorse.

Drawing on Kant, I have argued that skepticism is antithetical to agency. We must assume that reasons are genuine in order to act, and we must act. Still, one might urge, skepticism is a theoretical problem, not a practical one. So the news that the skeptic can't live her skepticism is of limited interest. But action is not limited to things like buying bread. Reasoning, theorizing, deliberating, judging are actions. So if the argument shows that a denial of skepticism is a necessary assumption of action, it is a necessary assumption of theorizing, deliberating, and so forth. And if good theories are products of good theorizing, then good theories rest on the assumption that skepticism is false as well. Acceptance, as Cohen characterizes it, is a disposition to take a consideration as a premise in assertoric inference or as a basis for action. These are not separate things. Inferring is acting.

The critical point of the argument, though, is that all that is required is the *assumption* that no skeptical alternative obtains. (It is a necessary assumption of doing what we cannot help but do.) We need not demonstrate that the assumption is true. So we do not need to *prove* that skepticism is false before getting on with the serious business of epistemology. We are entitled to assume it.

What does the assumption buy us? It puts us in a position to engage in second-order assessment. If we act on reasons that we can on reflection endorse, then the question arises, what sort of reasons should we endorse and why? Whether a consideration favors an action depends in part on the way the world is. So the assumption that we have reasons for action involves the assumption that we have access to the way the world is. This as yet says nothing about what affords the access. That is something we need to figure out. But if we set skepticism aside, we are in a position to investigate, to attempt to discover what affords us access to things, what methods, mechanisms, reasoning strategies are trustworthy, and how far our trust in such things should extend.

Nevertheless, skepticism remains a legitimate, if somewhat isolated, epistemological problem. This contention may seem doubtful if theorizing is a form of practice, and practice requires setting skepticism aside. Such a

doubt would be misplaced. In order to theorize we must set skepticism aside, but we can theorize about anything we like, including skepticism. Skepticism thus remains a topic for epistemological investigation, even though it is not a viable stance.¹¹

Very roughly the point is this: If a skeptical scenario obtains, all bets are off. Given what has happened so far, anything at all could happen next. If no skeptical scenario obtains, then it is not in principle impossible to figure out what the world is like and not in principle impossible to act so as to improve our prospects of achieving our ends. We can begin to inquire systematically into questions about the nature and weight of evidence, the reliability of methods, the suitability of epistemic standards and so forth. In view of the futility of accepting the skeptical scenario, we should simply suppose that it does not obtain.

This says nothing about how we should reason. But it connects second-order reflection with first-order views. It makes possible the assessment of inputs, reasoning strategies, and so forth. Among our beliefs are beliefs about our epistemic resources. We have beliefs about evidence, methods, reasoning, epistemic standards and the like. We are inclined to use them to assess our first-order beliefs. By setting skepticism aside, we can bring them on line. We can also evaluate them. We can ask whether our

standards of evidence are reasonable and reliable, whether a revision would better accord with the data, would better promote our epistemic goals, and so forth.

A critical question for epistemology is: what is good in the way of belief? If a skeptical scenario obtains, the answer is *nothing*. But if a skeptical scenario does not obtain, some beliefs are better than others. To act, to reason, to make sense of our perspectives as perspectives on the world, we need to assume that no skeptical scenario obtains. With that assumption on line, reasons are engaged, and we can investigate which beliefs, strategies, and the like are in fact good in the way of belief. We can also investigate how to tell such things. That is, we can get on with epistemology. My point is that all we need to do to start the project is assume. We need not prove. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the epistemological position that supplies the best answer to skepticism also supplies the best epistemology, on the assumption that skepticism is false. That remains to be seen.

Catherine Z. Elgin

Harvard University

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¹ Jonathan Adler, 'Skepticism and Universalizability,' *Journal of Philosophy*, 78 (1981), 143-156; David K. Lewis, 'Elusive Knowledge,' *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 418-445.

² L. Jonathan Cohen, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

³ See Jonathan Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, pp.55-72.

⁴ Myles Burnyeat, 'Can the Skeptic Live his Skepticism?' *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, pp. 117-148.

⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993, pp. 109-110.

⁶ In this way, Humean skepticism emerges from Cartesian skepticism. If Fox is utterly at a loss about how the world is, he has no basis for any particular expectations about the future.

⁷ Immanuel Kant. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff. Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1969, pp. 58-59.

⁸ This is not to say that Kant's ethics is a reflective endorsement theory. But it follows from the Kingdom of Ends formulation of the categorical imperative that the maxims that satisfy the categorical imperative are ones that the agent can on reflection endorse. My discussion of Kant is plainly indebted to Christine Korsgaard's *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Korsgaard is not, however remotely responsible for the use I make of her work.

⁹ See my *Considered Judgment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

¹⁰ Kant, p. 59.

¹¹ I am grateful to Peter Graham for raising the question discussed in this paragraph.