

Pyrrhonian Skepticism about Philosophy

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By Pyrrhonian Skepticism about Philosophy (PSP) we mean the view that, considering the permanent and pervasive dissensus in philosophy, *you cannot maintain* your philosophical beliefs—you *should suspend* them, or at least significantly (and perhaps painfully) reduce your confidence in their truth.

What does this “should” mean? It means that you have an *inescapable epistemic obligation* to suspend your philosophical beliefs. This obligation cannot be shrugged off—neither by claiming that it conflicts with your individual mindset or with your system of epistemic or non-epistemic principles and preferences, nor by claiming that you are indifferent to the value promoted by complying with it. Put differently, suspending your philosophical beliefs is a *categorical*, non-hypothetical epistemic obligation.

And why should you suspend your philosophical beliefs? Because *no matter how* you attempt to reason in favor of maintaining your philosophical beliefs in face of permanent disagreement, such attempts *necessarily fail*—they are not epistemically satisfactory. This “why” is not merely an escapable epistemic reason that you can shrug off. Rather, it is an *inescapable epistemic reason* underlying your inescapable epistemic obligation to suspend your philosophical beliefs. Hence, if you continue to maintain these beliefs, you act *epistemically wrongly*—you thereby engage in an epistemically culpable practice.

In this paper, we undertake a detailed elaboration and defense of PSP. In the first section, we clarify what PSP claims. In the second, we show how PSP forms a coherent meta-philosophical view without collapsing into self-defeat, and we formulate the strongest version of the “Argument from Disagreement” (AfD) for PSP. In the third, we present and examine the objections that can be raised against the AfD, and thus against PSP. In the fourth, we argue that these objections fail and that no epistemically satisfactory response can be given to the challenge posed by PSP. Finally, we dispel the misleading impression that PSP offers no perspective and explain the epistemic benefits that come with endorsing it.

1. The Main Lines of Pyrrhonian Skepticism about Philosophy

Here are three clarificatory and distinguishing remarks.

First, we must distinguish PSP from the view that “philosophical methods are imprecise and unreliable”, and that “philosophy is not a reliable instrument for discovering truth” (Brennan 2010, 3; and Tőzsér 2023, 159–174). Alternatively, shifting the emphasis, it must also be distinguished from the view that our epistemic resources are inadequate for solving philosophical problems—either because we are cognitively closed off from forming the concepts required for this (McGinn 1993), or because our philosophical beliefs are inevitably shaped by factors (personal character, temperament, cultural and socioeconomic environment, etc.) that have nothing to do with the corresponding truth (see e.g. James 1907; Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich 2001/2008; Nichols and Knobe 2007; Swan, Alexander, and Weinberg 2008). We call these views knowledge-centered metaskeptical views because the main goal of all of them is to show that there is no philosophical knowledge.

The main difference between PSP and the knowledge-centered metaphilosophical skepticism is that the latter, by itself, says *nothing* about what you should do with your philosophical beliefs considering permanent philosophical disagreement. It *merely* claims that, through doing philosophy, you cannot arrive at well-established truths. You cannot acquire philosophical knowledge—and, end of story. By contrast, PSP is centered on philosophical *beliefs*—it is a view about the *ethics* of philosophical belief. Unlike the knowledge-centered metaskeptical view, the central claim of PSP is not descriptive but *normative*—you act epistemically *rightly* if you suspend your philosophical beliefs taking into account permanent disagreement.

Second, PSP targets exclusively philosophical *beliefs*, or belief-like states (such as opinions or convictions), i.e. the attitude of taking certain propositions to be true. Thus, PSP does not concern non-doxastic attitudes toward a proposition *p*—it does not deny that you may *accept p* or *adopt p* as a working hypothesis instead of believing it. Accordingly, if you do philosophy without beliefs (with mere acceptances), PSP does not apply to your activity at all—it does not claim that you act epistemically wrongly.

Although PSP does not target acceptances, this does not mean that it enthusiastically endorses the following “salvaging” proposal: “if belief-based commitment fails, you should commit yourself to philosophical views via mere acceptances and consciously conduct theorizing in these spirit” (see esp. Beebe 2018). This proposal is logically compatible with PSP, but the relationship is problematic. It is because the focus of this proposal is how a philosopher can continue her profession keeping in mind the permanent disagreement (and this focus gives rise to the suspicion of opportunism) rather than how the individual’s belief-system and epistemic behavior should be impacted by the problem of permanent philosophical disagreement.

In other words, PSP does not endorse non-doxastic metaphilosophical views because they do not pay sufficient attention to the existential-epistemic issues of the individual epistemic agent and the ethics of beliefs. It is a pressing problem not only because the epistemic attitude behind PSP points toward this different focus but also because we suspect that most philosophers would not and cannot continue philosophy in the spirit of non-doxastic metaphilosophical approaches simply because their philosophical beliefs are too important to them and entangled with their profession (see Stoljar 2021, 73–76; Tőzsér 2023, 148–156; Aikin 2026, 56).

Third, PSP is *not radical* but a *moderate* skepticism about philosophy. Whereas radical skepticism at the meta-level holds that you should suspend *all* of your philosophical beliefs, PSP holds that *not* all of them should be suspended. The difference between these two kinds of skepticism lies in their assessment of consensually accepted propositions. According to radical skepticism, these consensuses have no epistemic value—using Bill Lycan’s words, they are merely “the results of Zeitgeist, fad, fashion, and careerism” (2013, 117). By contrast, PSP does not dispute the epistemic value of consensuses—if the truth of *p* is surrounded by a robust (long-standing and well-tested) consensus, then according to PSP this is a sign that the community of philosophical has *recognized the truth* of *p*. In other words, at least some consensually accepted propositions constitute instances of philosophical *knowledge*—they are propositions *known* to the community of philosophers.

Now, there is stable consensus about which *types* of propositions have given rise to stable consensus. Setting aside minor differences in emphasis (see e.g. Gutting 2009; Chalmers 2015; Frances 2018), the classifications are, at bottom, very similar: beyond trivialities, facts from the history of philosophy, and conceptual distinctions and the like, there are three main types of consensus. There is solid consensus about many *conditional* propositions. Thus, according to PSP, we collectively know, for example, that “If proper names are rigid designators, *then* there is a *posteriori* necessity.” There is also consensus about the *cost–benefit equations* of rival philosophical views. Thus, according to PSP, we collectively know, for example, that “Presentism has the virtue of being consistent with the phenomenology of time but has a hard time providing adequate truthmakers for true propositions about the past.” Finally, there is consensus about a small number of propositions asserting the *falsity* of certain philosophical views. Thus, according to PSP, we collectively know, for example, that “It is *not true* that moral evaluations are *merely* expressions of emotional attitudes.”

So, PSP allows you to retain a good many of your philosophical beliefs. At the same time—and this is the essential point—you should suspend belief in any proposition about which there is a robust (long-standing and well-tested) disagreement. This amounts to the following: you should suspend all of your *substantive* philosophical beliefs—substantive propositions do not appear on the lists of consensually accepted propositions (and thus of collective philosophical knowledge). Each of them is surrounded by permanent disagreement. Accordingly, you should suspend all those philosophical beliefs that concern *how things are*: what is the fundamental nature of reality and how we can know about it; what the correct definitions of central philosophical concepts are; what the solutions to the big philosophical problems are; and so on. Thus, although PSP is moderate, its “should” really bites hard—aside from conditionals and the like, you have an inescapable epistemic obligation to suspend *all* of your philosophical beliefs.

2. Pyrrhonian Skepticism about Philosophy as a Coherent View

Few would deny that the phenomenon of permanent philosophical disagreement is unsettling for our substantive philosophical beliefs, and that the skeptical challenge it raises cannot—or should not—be dismissed with a shrug. At the same time, most philosophers hold that a skepticism calling for the suspension of our substantive philosophical beliefs inevitably undermines itself (see e.g. Paár 2015; Grundmann 2021; Dixon 2024). And if it is self-defeating, then its injunction—its “should”—cannot possess binding force. In what follows, we aim to clear PSP of the charge of self-defeat and thereby show how it forms a coherent meta-philosophical vision.

2.1 The Problem of Self-Defeat

For the skeptical injunction (“Suspend your substantive philosophical beliefs!”) to have *normative force*, PSP *must commit itself* to the truth of certain substantive philosophical propositions via beliefs. A form of skepticism that says, “For such and such *reasons*, you *should* suspend your belief in the *truth* of such and such propositions”, while at the same time expecting you to suspend your belief that:

- (1) “I have (inescapable) epistemic *obligations*”
- (2) “I have (inescapable) epistemic *reasons*”
- (3) “There are *truths*”

would be outright inconsistent. Similarly, a form of skepticism that says, “For such and such *reasons*, you *should* suspend your belief in the *truth* of such and such propositions” while simultaneously enjoining you to suspend your belief that

- (4) “I am at least a minimally generally *reliable* epistemic agent”
- (5) “I *may retain* any belief that continues to seem true after thorough examination, provided that this examination reveals no defeaters”

would be outright inconsistent as well.

The truth of these five propositions constitutes a *necessary precondition* of PSP. The truth of the first three is its necessary *objective* precondition: only if these propositions are true can an inescapable epistemic reason be given for the claim that you have an inescapable epistemic obligation to suspend belief in even a single proposition. And the truth of the latter two is its necessary *subjective* precondition: only if these propositions are true can you (as the addressee of the skeptical injunction) reasonably be expected to recognize the force of the reasons contained in the injunction and to trust the seemings that arise from careful reflection, thereby coming to be committed to PSP.

At the root of the problem of self-defeat, then, lies what appears to be a fatal dilemma. According to PSP, we should suspend all of our substantive philosophical beliefs—at the same time, the proponents of PSP should continue to maintain belief in the truth of the five substantive philosophical propositions above. If they do not maintain these beliefs, then PSP is irreparably *inconsistent*—if they do maintain them, then it is irreparably *self-defeating*.

There are, of course, familiar skeptical responses to the problem of self-defeat, but they do little to resolve our dilemma. We have in mind responses such as the following: “The skeptic *need not actually believe* the proposition that suspension of belief is the only correct attitude with respect to a given proposition.” Or: “Skepticism is fundamentally a *reactive attitude*: once the skeptic has shown that you maintain your beliefs without adequate justification, their task is complete.” Or again: “Once the skeptic has shown that you should suspend your beliefs, *they may discard* their reasoning like a ladder.” (Even though we do not know contemporary forms of the third approach, Diego Machuca provided a fresh combination of the first two recently; see Machuca 2022, 223–228.) What we require, however, is something more substantial than these well-known responses—something capable of defending PSP, as a coherent metaphilosophical position, against the suspicion of self-defeat.

2.2 Inalienable Epistemic Entitlements as Foundations

The crucial point is this: maintaining the truth of the five propositions constituting the belief-set of PSP does not amount to self-defeat for PSP, because these propositions enjoy a

special kind of protection. This protection does not arise from the fact that the truth of these propositions is a necessary precondition of PSP—obviously not; taken by itself, that consideration would carry little weight. Rather, the protection derives from the fact that these propositions have a *special kind of content* by virtue of which *anyone has an inalienable epistemic entitlement* to maintain belief in their truth—*regardless* of whether they stand on the side of PSP or not.

Let's begin with the notion of entitlement. You are epistemically entitled to maintain your belief in the truth of p if you may maintain that belief *gratis*—that is, if “[you] do not have to do any evidential work to earn it” (Wright 2004, 174). In other words, you are epistemically entitled to believe p if doing so does not require evidence for p —if maintaining your belief is independent of evidential support or cognitive work.

One line of reasoning in favor of the claim that you can maintain your belief in the truth of p without evidential work is that p plays a cornerstone role in some epistemically valuable project (see e.g. Wright 2004 and 2014; Pedersen 2009; Mathiessen 2014; Coliva 2015 and 2025; Pritchard 2015; Ohlhorst 2024). Examples include propositions such as “There exists a mind-independent world” or “Induction is reliable.” Yet we are not satisfied with this role-based conception of entitlement. First, it is not entirely true that maintaining belief in the truth of these propositions is wholly unearned, at all—it is just not you, but rather the epistemic project in question itself, that earns the entitlement. Second (and more importantly), it cannot be ruled out that sufficiently strong evidence may emerge against the truth of these “cornerstones,” in which case such entitlements may be lost—even if no evidence was originally required for possessing them. (We cannot help but remark that permanent philosophical disagreement itself seems to be precisely the sort of defeater that could undermine such role-based entitlements).

The second line of reasoning is stronger, and it is the one we need. According to it, you can maintain your belief in the truth of p without evidential work if it is *impossible* for sufficiently strong evidence against the truth of p to arise—if it *cannot happen that*, for epistemic reasons, you should, in any case, give up that belief. This line of reasoning is stronger than the previous one because, in this case, the relevant entitlements are independent not only of evidence, but also of the role played by the proposition within epistemic projects. In other words, unlike the previous line of reasoning—which holds that you are entitled to maintain your beliefs only so long as sufficiently strong evidence against their truth does not arise (while nothing rules out *a priori* the possibility that such evidence may arise)—the latter line of reasoning claims that *no epistemic situation is possible* in which you would have an inescapable epistemic obligation to suspend the beliefs in question (some seeds of this approach can be found in Zanetti 2021). Thus, unlike “role-centered cornerstone-type” entitlements, we call the latter *inalienable epistemic entitlements*. By definition:

You have inalienable epistemic entitlement to maintain belief p iff having inescapable epistemic obligation to not hold p to be true is conceptually-logically impossible, and this impossibility is there not because somehow you earned to hold p to be true.

Our central claim, then, is the following: PSP is not self-defeating because, we have, in the sense defined above, inalienable epistemic entitlements to maintain belief in the truth of the substantive philosophical propositions that belong to its package—under no circumstances is it an inescapable epistemic obligation for us to suspend them.

Put differently, PSP would undermine itself in two cases. First, if the propositions to whose truth one must be committed *would require justification*—if their truth *would need evidential work*. Second, if these propositions were merely role-based cornerstones of some valuable epistemic enterprise—since it cannot be ruled out that strong evidence may arise against them. Yet this is precisely what we claim (and what we take to be the key to the solution): the fundamental epistemic package of PSP consists *exclusively* of propositions such that maintaining belief in their truth does not require evidential work and it is not possible for sufficiently strong evidence to arise against them. Consequently, it would be unintelligible to call upon anyone to suspend belief in them.

2.3 Inalienable Epistemic Entitlements of Pyrrhonian Skepticism about Philosophy

Let's first consider the three necessary objective preconditions of PSP—and examine why we have inalienable epistemic entitlements to maintain our beliefs in their truth.

(I-OBLIGATION) I have, at least one, inescapable epistemic obligation.

Suppose someone claims that we have no inalienable epistemic entitlement to maintain our belief in I-OBLIGATION. They might argue as follows: “We have an inescapable epistemic obligation to abandon our belief in I-OBLIGATION because there are no such obligations—in light of such-and-such evidence, it is unlikely that they exist.” But this is transparently unintelligible, self-undermining pseudo-reasoning—for if there are (probably) no inescapable epistemic obligations, then it plainly cannot be an inescapable epistemic obligation for us to suspend our belief in I-OBLIGATION. Or they might argue instead: “We have an inescapable epistemic obligation to abandon our belief in I-OBLIGATION because the only inescapable epistemic obligation we have is the obligation to abandon belief in I-OBLIGATION.” This too is transparently unintelligible reasoning—given that the epistemic ground for rejecting the truth of a proposition cannot be that the proposition itself happens to be true.

In short, whether someone attempts to reason for the claim that we have an inescapable obligation to abandon our belief in I-OBLIGATION by claiming that I-OBLIGATION is false, or by claiming that it is true, they can produce only an unintelligible pseudo-reason rather than a genuine one—and no alternative mode of epistemic reasoning is available. Consequently, our belief in I-OBLIGATION necessarily enjoys protection from every attempt to provide an inescapable epistemic reason against it, and therefore anyone has an inalienable epistemic entitlement to maintain their belief in I-OBLIGATION (this line of argument is inspired in part by Lockie 2018, 183).

(I-REASON) I have, at least one, inescapable epistemic reason.

I-REASON likewise enjoys necessary protection, if only because it follows from I-OBLIGATION: you can have an inescapable obligation only if an inescapable reason can, in

principle, be given for you (on reasons as the basis for obligations, see MacIntyre 1981). But the protection of I-REASON can also be shown independently of I-OBLIGATION.

Suppose someone raises the following objection: “We have an inescapable epistemic obligation to abandon our belief in I-REASON because it is unlikely that there exists even a single inescapable epistemic reason.” This line of reasoning immediately and transparently defeats itself: for if there are no inescapable epistemic reasons (as they claim), then their own reason clearly cannot be inescapable either. Accordingly, whatever evidence they appeal to in support of their argument, we may simply disregard it if our mindset happens to be such that we do so. This means that if there are no inescapable epistemic reasons, then everyone may believe whatever they wish, depending on their mindset—including I-REASON.

But suppose instead that someone raises the following objection: “We have an inescapable epistemic obligation to abandon our belief in I-REASON because we have an inescapable epistemic reason to abandon it.” This reasoning is likewise transparently unintelligible, since it, in effect, claims that I-REASON is true and this is, in part, why we should give up the belief in I-REASON—but the truth of any belief (by definition) cannot be an *epistemic* reason for giving up any belief, since every epistemic reason against any belief indicates directly or indirectly the improbability of the truth of the belief. Thus, both objections are transparently unintelligible—and no alternative mode of epistemic reasoning is possible. Consequently, our belief in I-REASON necessarily enjoys protection, and therefore anyone has an inalienable epistemic entitlement to maintain their belief in I-REASON.

(TRUTH) There is at least one truth.

It is now easy to see that any attempt to deny TRUTH collapses into unintelligible gibberish. If someone attempts to provide an inescapable epistemic reason for suspending belief in TRUTH by insisting that it is true that there is no evidence for TRUTH, then their reasoning is both self-defeating and transparently nonsensical. Nor does the situation improve if they claim that there is only one truth—namely, that we should to suspend belief in the existence of truth—for the truth of a belief cannot itself constitute an epistemic reason for suspending belief. Consequently, our belief in TRUTH necessarily enjoys protection, and therefore anyone has an inalienable epistemic entitlement to maintain their belief in TRUTH (for a more detailed argument, see Zanetti 2021).

Let’s now consider the three necessary subjective preconditions of PSP—those concerning the cognitive capacities you must have in order to be capable of having inescapable epistemic reasons, and thus inescapable epistemic obligations.

(R-RIGHT) My epistemic capacity has (at least) a general-minimal reliability with regard to achieving the truth.

R-RIGHT states the following: if you put worthwhile effort into determining the truth value of *p* by exercising your epistemic capacity, then *either* you have a better chance of attaining the truth than you would have if you did not exercise it and merely guessing what the truth is, *or* you do not have a better chance of attaining it, but you do have a better chance of

attaining the meta-truth that your epistemic capacity is no better than merely guessing the truth value of p . In other words, the truth of R-RIGHT is a precondition for anything to be a reason for maintaining any proposition to be true because without such epistemic capacity you would be no better than a guessing machine that is impervious to reasons.

It is easy to see that no intelligible reason can be given for suspending our belief in R-RIGHT—whatever the reasoning may be, it undermines itself. If someone were to argue that R-RIGHT is false and that our epistemic capacity does not have even general-minimal reliability, then—as soon as we deemed the reason against R-RIGHT acceptable—we could not, at the same time, regard the reasoning against R-RIGHT itself as likely true. We could not believe that we would be more likely to arrive at the truth by trusting this reasoning (and thereby rejecting R-RIGHT) than by deciding what to believe on the basis of a coin toss; thus, we could not trust the truth of the reasoning against R-RIGHT. Consequently, any reason that would count against R-RIGHT would, for us, necessarily imply that we cannot trust its truth, since from our own perspective its truth would be improbable; in this way, it would undermine itself. Any attempt to justify the rejection of R-RIGHT by appealing to the truth of R-RIGHT would be unintelligible, since the truth of a belief can never be an epistemic reason for its rejection. So, no genuine, intelligible reason can be given for rejecting R-RIGHT, and therefore anyone has an inalienable epistemic entitlement to maintain their belief in R-RIGHT.

But let's take one step further, towards the fifth proposition. Given the truth of R-RIGHT it *follows* that, if even after a more thorough examination it still seems to us that the belief at issue has no defeater, we can continue to hold it solely on the basis that it appears to be true. In other words, the truth of R-RIGHT implies a weak version of phenomenological conservatism. Not (and clearly not) the strong version, according to which every truth-seeming has justificatory force without exception (Huemer 2006 and 2013), but rather the more epistemically modest version, according to which only those truth-seemings retain justificatory force for which no defeater can be found even after thorough examination. (Duncan Pritchard, 2025, draws a similar connection between his hinge epistemology and epistemic disjunctivism.) That is to say, this Weak Phenomenological Conservatism (WPC) maintains that *we can take at face value* those truth-seemings (*we have sufficient reason to trust the truth* of the corresponding beliefs) for which no defeater emerges even *after a thorough examination* (permanent philosophical disagreement counts as a defeater).

(WPC) I can maintain any of my beliefs that seems to be true even after thorough examination if this examination does not reveal any defeater.

It is now easy to see why suspending WPC cannot be our inescapable epistemic obligation. Suppose, for instance, that someone was to argue that rejecting WPC is inescapably obligatory on the grounds that certain evidence indicates that WPC is false. But if we cannot continue to maintain WPC even when no defeater is found after thorough examination, then how could we continue to maintain that certain evidence indicates that WPC is false, and that it therefore should be rejected? This does not seem intelligible because it is also a truth-seeming that “something is a defeater of WPC”. Likewise, it would be unintelligible and incoherent to argue that we are obligated to reject WPC because WPC is true—after all, the truth of a belief can never serve as an epistemic reason for rejecting it. Hence, in principle, it would be impossible to give a reason why anyone could be under an inescapable epistemic

obligation to reject WPC, and therefore anyone has an inalienable epistemic entitlement to maintain their belief in WPC.

2.4 The Master Argument for Pyrrhonian Skepticism about Philosophy

The foregoing arguments speak for themselves, but let's make our point entirely explicit. The intended conclusion of the above arguments is not that the five propositions in question are *true*, or even *probably true*. Rather, the intended conclusion is that *we have an inalienable epistemic entitlement to believe* in the truth of these propositions. Anyone may maintain these beliefs *gratis*: under no circumstances is there an inescapable epistemic obligation to suspend them, since no inescapable epistemic reason can be given against maintaining them—any such attempt is unintelligible. (*Nota bene*: beliefs with the opposite content require justification; *a fortiori*, no one is entitled to maintain them *gratis*.)

As far as we can tell, we have shown all of this—we take the foregoing arguments to be knockdown. At the same time, we do not think they merit drumrolls or trumpet fanfares. These arguments are, after all, trivial (certainly the first three are), and there is nothing particularly surprising about their conclusions (at least in the case of the first three).

Our contribution, if any, lies primarily in having rendered these arguments explicit and presented them in a systematic form. Perhaps also in having thereby shed light on the fact that the central beliefs of PSP necessarily stand in the background of *every* epistemic practice—given that the validity of the foregoing arguments is *independent* of whether PSP is true or not.

With all this in place, let's now consider how the AfD in support of PSP can be formulated in its strongest form and free from any suspicion of self-defeat:

- (0) There is permanent disagreement over substantive (big, central, fundamental) philosophical problems.
- (1) If there is permanent disagreement over a philosophical problem, then you do not have knockdown argument(s) for the truth of your substantive philosophical beliefs.
- (2) If you do not have knockdown argument(s) for the truth of your substantive philosophical beliefs, then you do not have sufficiently strong reason to trust that your beliefs at issue are true—that your beliefs (and not one of your interlocutors' beliefs) hit the truth.
- (3) If you do not have sufficiently strong reason to trust that your substantive philosophical beliefs are true (that your beliefs hit the truth, not one of your interlocutors' beliefs), then you have an inescapable epistemic obligation to suspend them—EXCEPT IF it is conceptually impossible to have such an inescapable epistemic obligation to do so.

Therefore:

(C) You have an inescapable epistemic obligation to suspend your substantive philosophical beliefs—EXCEPT IF it is conceptually impossible to have such an inescapable epistemic obligation to do so.

3. Answers to the Pyrrhonian Skeptical Challenge

The AfD presented above is a formally valid chain of inferences starting from the phenomenon of permanent philosophical disagreement. Accordingly, if you reject the conclusion of the AfD, you must deny one of its premises—more precisely, one of the three conditionals it contains. In what follows, we present these objections and show what reasons you can have for maintaining substantive philosophical beliefs despite permanent disagreement. In short, we map the possible forms of anti-skepticism, thereby hopefully providing a clearer and more comprehensive picture than previous attempts at systematization.

3.1 Three Possible Objections

Premise (1) of the AfD can be denied as follows. Despite the permanent disagreement, you have knockdown arguments for the truth of your substantive philosophical beliefs—that is, arguments whose conclusiveness or truth-conduciveness no rational person could reasonably doubt, and regarding which no one could have good epistemic grounds to regard them as uncertain or invalid (for the notion of a knockdown argument, see Ballantyne 2014; Frances 2022, 39–47; Tózsér 2023, 16–36). If this is so, then you can continue to maintain those beliefs. But you can do so only because you have compelling arguments for their truth—because you have substantive philosophical knowledge.

This is undoubtedly a live option. Peter van Inwagen is too hasty when he writes that “the possibility of a knockdown argument and the possibility of agreement in philosophy are the same topic” (2004, 339). The fact that permanent disagreement surrounds a philosophical problem means only that there is *no collective* philosophical knowledge—that there is no argument for one of the competing views that is consensually regarded as knockdown. However, the fact that permanent disagreement surrounds a philosophical problem does not mean that there is no *individual* philosophical knowledge—one of the parties may still have knockdown arguments. The conceptual relation is clear: permanent disagreement may arise not only because neither party knows the truth, but also because one party does know the truth while its opponents are simply false believers.

In short, individual philosophical knowledge is possible, at least in principle. This is why you can deny premise (1) of the AfD and claim that you know that p even though p is subject to permanent disagreement. The explanation of permanent philosophical disagreement is simply that your interlocutors (and, more generally, the community of philosophers) do not sufficiently understand your arguments—they are unable to recognize their compelling force. If they understood them sufficiently, they would recognize that the arguments remove the cognitive freedom to believe anything other than what their conclusions assert.

Premise (2) of the AfD may be denied in the following way. If you do not regard your arguments for the truth of your beliefs as knockdown, yet take yourself to have sufficiently strong reason to trust that the beliefs at issue are true (or likely true) while those of your interlocutors are false, then this means that you ascribe *to yourself*, as an epistemic agent, some sort of *extra epistemic power*.

Here's the point. If you have a knockdown argument for the truth of your belief that p , then *everything* on the basis of which you can regard p as true—and your interlocutor's belief that $\neg p$ as false—is *contained within the argument itself*. However, if you do not have a knockdown argument for the truth of your belief that p , then the argument *does not contain everything* on which the truth of your belief that p ultimately depends. Thus, you cannot appeal merely to the strength of your arguments, since they lack compelling force. Therefore, what your belief that p ultimately depends on for its truth lies *beyond* your argument itself—indeed, it is YOU on whom the truth of your belief that p ultimately depends.

Put plainly, in the absence of knockdown arguments, you can regard your belief that p as true (or likely true) and take your philosophical view to be in a more advantageous epistemic position than its rivals *only if* you judge yourself to be an epistemic agent who, *beyond* your arguments and *in contrast* to your interlocutors, possesses some *extra* epistemic capacity or excellence.

This “extra epistemic power” can be understood within one of only two conceptual frameworks. On the one hand, you can say: “Although my argument for the truth of p is not knockdown, *beyond* my argument *I have access some further private evidence* for the truth of p , evidence that *reliably indicates to me*—on the basis of what *I can see*—that my reasoning tracks the truth”. On the other hand, you can say: “Although my argument for the truth of p is not knockdown, my belief that p stands in an *appropriate relationship* to the truth at issue—my belief in p is caused, in the right way, by a fact or state of affairs that makes p true; it is produced by a *reliable* (truth-tracking) belief-producing process”. Whether you appeal to private evidence (see e.g. van Inwagen 1996) or to epistemic favored status (see e.g. Plantinga 2015), you can claim that, despite permanent disagreement, you can continue maintaining the substantive philosophical beliefs in question. In this case, unlike in the previous one, the explanation of permanent philosophical disagreement is not that your interlocutors do not sufficiently understand your arguments—rather, it is that, owing to your epistemic grace, you have arrived at the truth, whereas your interlocutors, lacking such grace, have arrived at falsehoods.

The denial of premise (3) of the AfD takes the following form. If you do not regard your arguments for your substantive philosophical beliefs as knockdown and, lacking any epistemic grace, acknowledge that you have no sufficiently strong reason to trust that your beliefs are true rather than those of your interlocutors, then you must also acknowledge that your beliefs enjoy no privileged epistemic status. Your substantive philosophical views are simply some among many competing alternatives.

Now, since you can appeal neither to knockdown arguments nor to epistemic grace, only the following line of reasoning remains available to you: “Although I *indeed* have no sufficiently

strong reason to trust in the truth of my substantive philosophical beliefs, and therefore I should *indeed* suspend the beliefs at issue, *I nevertheless have a strong excuse for not doing so.*” The crucial point is this: premise (3) can be denied only by appealing to excuses—or, more precisely, to *genuine* and *strong* excuses. Appeals such as “I find it difficult,” “it would be uncomfortable,” or “I would rather not give up the philosophical beliefs to which I have devoted so much thought and effort” and the like do not count as such.

This genuine and strong excuse can be understood in one of only two ways. The first centers on the notion of “incapacity”, the second on the notion of “harmful consequences”. On the one hand, you can reason as follows: “*I am psychologically incapable* of suspending my core beliefs on which my substantive philosophical views rest, for these are central components of my personal integrity, cognitive economy, and intellectual household” (see e.g. Lewis 1973, 88). On the other hand, you can reason as follows: “Suspending my substantive philosophical beliefs would have *devastating consequences for me*—I would sink into complete intellectual apathy; gradually, every question would lose its significance, including those that matter most to me” (see e.g. Ranelli 2026). Or, to put it in the first-person plural: “It would have highly *detrimental consequences for us* (for the community of philosophers) if we all suspended our substantive beliefs and attempted to continue philosophical theorizing without them—for we know well (see Mercier and Sperber 2011) that epistemic communities whose members maintain beliefs tend to perform better than those whose members rely solely on acceptance, supposition, or working hypotheses” (see e.g. Mathesen 2015; Hallson and Kappel 2018).

Unlike the denial of premises (1) and (2) of the AfD, the denial of premise (3) necessarily involves a commitment to *permissivism*. That is, if you deny (3), then—unlike when denying (1) or (2)—you must allow that your interlocutors can maintain their philosophical beliefs as well. Indeed, everyone can maintain their substantive philosophical beliefs, provided that they can show their views to be coherent (that is, free of irresolvable inconsistency) and are able to answer the objections raised against them (that is, none of these objections is compelling). In fact, this excuse-based answer is nothing other than *doxastic equilibrium*. Inspired by David Lewis, it holds that, since truth is beyond our reach, we must settle for a more modest epistemic aim: “a reasonable goal for a philosopher is to bring [her beliefs] into equilibrium” (1983, x; see Kocsis 2026; Kocsis and Tőzsér 2026 for a detailed discussion).

3.2 A Taxonomy of the Objections

Only the above three objections can be raised against the AfD, and only by relying on these three lines of reasoning can you continue to maintain your substantive philosophical beliefs despite permanent dissensus—unless, of course, you take a mere shrug off the shoulders to be an adequate objection and reasoning. These three responses exhaust the logical space.

Pace premise (1): “I can maintain my substantive philosophical beliefs because my argument(s) force their truth into the open.” Let’s call this the Knockdown-Based Answer (KBA).

Pace premise (2): “I can maintain my substantive philosophical beliefs because I am wired in such a way that, unlike others, I am able ‘to get a feel’ for the truth.” Let’s call this the Grace-Based Answer (GBA).

And *pace* premise (3): “I can maintain my substantive philosophical beliefs because I am released from the requirement to suspend them.” Let’s call this the Excuse-Based Answer (EBA).

We now turn to a closer examination of these responses: where their main fault lines lie and how they are conceptually related. Here’s the taxonomy we propose, which we take to be the clearest way of understanding them.

The first question: Do your substantive philosophical beliefs enjoy *a privileged epistemic status*?

According to the EBA, they do not—they are merely some among many. According to the KBA and the GBA, they do—you can regard them as true, or at least likely to be true. This is the main fault line.

The KBA and the GBA, however, offer different accounts of this privileged status. According to the KBA, the privilege belongs *to the argument itself*. It is a wholly contingent—and epistemically irrelevant—fact that you, rather than someone else, happen to have knockdown argument(s) for the truth of the propositions in question. That is, your beliefs enjoy a privileged status, but this has nothing to do with you as a person. According to the GBA, by contrast, the privilege belongs not to your arguments but *to you as an epistemic agent*. The source of the reliability (or credibility) of the beliefs in question *lies in your epistemic grace*—it is not something that can be made transparent or incorporated into the argument itself. In other words, the KBA requires no further explanation of why your beliefs enjoy a privileged epistemic status—everything that matters is contained within the argument. The GBA, by contrast, does require such an explanation—since not everything that matters is contained within the argument, the ultimate explanation appeals to your epistemically graced status.

The second question: Do you maintain your substantive philosophical beliefs by appeal to *egocentric reasons*?

According to the KBA, you do not—all epistemically relevant factors are contained within your argument. According to the GBA and EBA you do—epistemic self-favoring is allowed. This is the main fault line.

The GBA and the EBA, however, offer different accounts of the nature of this egocentric reasoning. According to the GBA, your core beliefs and truth-seemings have greater epistemic weight than those of your interlocutors—they enjoy a privileged epistemic status and bear a special relation to the truth. According to the EBA, by contrast, your core beliefs and truth-seemings have no extra epistemic weight—they are privileged only in the sense that they are *yours* and they bear no special relation to the truth. Put differently, they are privileged in a merely *indexical* sense.

Just as your children have no metaphysical privilege and yet are *privileged to you*, so too your core beliefs and truth-seemings have no epistemic privilege and yet are *privileged to you*—they

constitute the foundation of your worldview and system of beliefs. In other words, whereas the GBA holds that your egocentric self-favoring has genuine epistemic value (see Békefi 2023), the EBA is committed to nothing stronger than the following conditional: “If these and these are my truth-seemings and my core beliefs, then I should believe this and this philosophical view to be true, insofar as I wish to remain coherent.”

The third question: Are your arguments for your substantive philosophical beliefs *transparent*?

According to the GBA, they are not—not all epistemically relevant factors are contained in them, most notably your own epistemically graded status. According to the KBA and the EBA, they are—there are no hidden epistemic factors at work. This is the main fault line.

The KBA and the EBA, however, offer different accounts of the transparency of the arguments supporting your beliefs. According to the KBA, all epistemically relevant factors are built into your arguments—and these arguments lead to the truth those who sufficiently understand them. According to the EBA, all epistemically relevant factors are likewise contained within your arguments—yet these arguments do not lead to the truth. The most you can achieve with your arguments is to render your philosophical views coherent (by rooting out inconsistencies) and to defend them against objections (by showing that none of them knocks those views out of the saddle).

4. Defence of Pyrrhonian Skepticism about Philosophy

Below, we will revisit the three objections discussed above (and the corresponding anti-skeptical stances) one final time and show precisely what needs to be shown to defend PSP; namely, how PSP’s argumentative strategy must be structured. We will then argue that, whether you proceed in the spirit of KBA, GBA, or EBA, continuing to maintain your substantive philosophical beliefs constitutes epistemic wrongdoing and thereby amounts to an epistemically culpable practice.

4.1 The General Argumentative Strategy

Knockdown-Based Answer

If, despite permanent disagreement, some have knockdown argument(s) for the truth of their substantive philosophical beliefs, then *this means* that the community of philosophers *blindly passes by* the instances of substantive philosophical knowledge. That is, although *there are* knockdown arguments for the truth of substantive philosophical theses, the community of philosophers *does not (is unable to) recognize* them—it fails to grasp these arguments sufficiently. In principle, we should be able to understand these arguments and recognize their compelling force, yet for some reason this does not happen. Contrary, in evaluating them, we systematically and invariably commit some kind of *performative error*: something escapes our attention, something is misunderstood, or our judgment is distorted by factors irrelevant to the assessment of the argument, and so on.

If the community of philosophers fails to recognize knockdown arguments for substantive philosophical theses—that is, if it is unable to distinguish truth-conducive lines of reasoning from those that are not truth-conducive—then we have no reason to trust that consensually

accepted propositions constitute instances of collective philosophical knowledge. Why? Because it is highly implausible to suppose that, while the evaluation of knockdown arguments for substantive philosophical theses is invariably and unavoidably marred by some kind of error, we nevertheless perform well with respect to other propositions: we reliably draw conceptual distinctions, reliably recognize conditional truths, reliably appreciate the cost–benefit equation of competing theories, and reliably discredit those views that are in fact false.

Now, all of this means that KBA entails *a far more radical form of skepticism* than PSP. The skeptical scenario that emerges is one in which, apart from an elite minority, the community of philosophers ultimately lacks knowledge. We must doubt the epistemic value of stable consensus, the reliability of Stanford-style state-of-the-art surveys, and even whether we have adequately mapped the space of possible positions with respect to various philosophical problems. Thus, even if KBA “helps” some philosophers retain beliefs grounded entirely in their *own* philosophical accomplishments, it requires everyone—including the select few who sufficiently understand the relevant knockdown arguments—to suspend belief in the truth of consensually accepted propositions.

Grace-Based Answer

If there are epistemically graced philosophers, and it is by virtue of this grace that they arrive at substantive philosophical truths—whether because they have access to reliable private evidence or because their belief-forming processes are epistemically blessed—then *it follows* that, in the absence of such grace, substantive philosophical truths cannot be attained. And this, in turn, implies that the “others,” the “false believers,” the “majority,” are *epistemically deprived*.

This “epistemic deprivation” does not mean that the others, the false believers, the majority lack *sufficient* intellectual strength to grasp the arguments in question—much as most of us do not have *enough* intellectual strength to understand, say, the proof of Fermat’s Last Theorem. It means that their epistemic equipment is *fatally flawed*: their intuitions and truth-seemings are *fundamentally delusive*. As a result, they inhabit a pit from which, barring extraordinary epistemic luck, they cannot escape—as their deprivation extends even to recognizing their own epistemic deprivation and doing anything to remedy it. That is, *unless* the private truth-indicating evidence hitherto hidden from them becomes manifest, or *unless* they themselves become epistemically graced, they remain in “epistemic perdition” for as long as this condition persists.

Accordingly, like KBA, GBA entails *a form of skepticism incomparably more radical* than PSP. Besides implying that we cannot trust the results produced by the community of philosophers, GBA brings to life what is, in a certain respect, the most terrifying skeptical scenario of all: those who are not among the elite minority of the epistemically graced are members of the majority consigned to epistemic perdition.

Excuse-Based Answer

Premises (1) and (2) of AfD are true—KBA and GBA are false. And if KBA and GBA are false, then *it follows* that *we are epistemically equal*—meaning that philosophers’ competence, degree of informedness, and resistance to biasing factors do not correlate with the positions they occupy in philosophical controversies.

If KBA and GBA are false, then, in giving reasons for why you can maintain your substantive philosophical beliefs, you cannot appeal to epistemic inequality—to the claim that these beliefs are epistemically privileged. (Such an appeal would be available only in the spirit of KBA or GBA.) Consequently, it is because these beliefs are not epistemically privileged that you must provide reasons for maintaining them—you do not have sufficiently strong reason to trust that they are true, or even more likely to be true than the beliefs held by your interlocutors.

Thus, there is only one possible reason: you can maintain your substantive philosophical beliefs because you have a genuine and sufficiently strong excuse for not complying with the skeptic’s injunction. Just as you have an inescapable moral obligation to help those in distress in your immediate vicinity (for example, a drowning person), yet may be excused for failing to discharge this obligation if you cannot swim, so too, although you have an inescapable epistemic obligation to suspend your substantive philosophical beliefs, you may have a genuine and sufficiently strong excuse for failing to do so, either because you are incapable of doing so or because doing so would have devastating consequences.



In light of the foregoing, it is clear that PSP is under attack from two directions. On the one hand, from the perspective of KBA and GBA: PSP is false because *we are not epistemically equal*. On the other hand, from the perspective of EBA: PSP is false because, thanks to our excuses, *the skeptic’s injunction lacks binding force*. Thus, it is now also clear how the defensive argumentative strategy of PSP’s argumentative strategy must be structured.

On the one hand, we must show that *we are protected* against the extreme forms of skepticism generated by KBA and GBA—that we are entitled to place epistemic trust in the judgment of the community of philosophers, both with respect to its consensus and its dissensus. The flip side is that *no one is entitled* either to attribute compelling force to their arguments despite permanent disagreement or to vindicate the epistemically privileged status of their core beliefs or basic truth-seemings by appealing to their epistemic grace. (Proponents of KBA and GBA have no ultimate reason to attribute epistemic superiority to themselves rather than to their opponents.) The essential point is this: in defending PSP, we must, paradoxically, show that *only PSP can prevent these extreme forms of skepticism from taking hold*—and thereby show that those who continue to maintain their substantive philosophical beliefs in the spirit of KBA or GBA act epistemically wrongly.

On the other hand, we must show that, *pace* EBA, appealing to excuses is *neither sufficient nor appropriate*. It is not sufficient because no epistemic remedy is available for the phenomenologically palpable tension between the following two propositions: “*I can maintain*

my belief that p ” and “*I do not have sufficiently strong reason to trust that p is true, or more likely to be true.*” And it is not appropriate because it cannot be justified that our excuses are *genuinely valid*. In other words, EBA involves an excessive and unjustifiably high degree of epistemic risk-taking. The following doubt remains ineliminable: “By appealing to my excuses, am I not in fact violating my epistemic obligations?”

4.2 The First Front: Arguments against Knockdown-Based Answers and Grace-Based Answers

It is, of course, impossible to refute KBA and GBA (and the forms of skepticism they generate), whether *a priori* or *a posteriori*. They cannot be refuted *a priori* because it is consistently conceivable—logically and conceptually possible—that S has knockdown arguments for the truth of p , or that S gains access to the truth of p by virtue of epistemic grace, while the community of philosophers fails to recognize these cases. Nor can they be refuted *a posteriori*, since there is no evidence whatsoever that the community of philosophers does, or would, recognize knockdown arguments advanced in support of substantive philosophical theses, or that it does, or would, identify the epistemic grace of certain philosophers on the basis of some telltale signs—given that, thus far, it has not recognized a single one.

Fortunately, we need not engage in a mud-wrestling match with proponents of KBA or GBA, for we can show that we are entitled to place our trust in the community of philosophers. Here’re the main steps of our argument.

(1) We are entitled to believe in R-RIGHT: our epistemic capacity is generally and minimally reliable—we are in a better epistemic position than a mere guessing machine. We are likewise entitled to believe in WPC: we can maintain those beliefs that seem true even after thorough examination—provided that this examination reveals no defeaters.

(2) One of our beliefs that seems true and for which we can find no defeater is the following: the basic epistemic capacities of human beings without serious cognitive impairment are *the same*. Whatever we can understand, other people can understand as well. Whatever we can know, other people can know as well. Whatever truths are accessible to us are accessible to other people as well. This belief in the basic epistemic homogeneity of humankind is supported by careful scientific investigation. Indeed, racism, misogyny, and similar doctrines are not only morally and socially objectionable but also scientifically discredited insofar as they rest on assumptions of fundamental cognitive or epistemic inferiority. Thus, even after careful scrutiny, we find no defeater for the belief in the basic *epistemic homogeneity of humankind*.

Of course, people differ in the reliability of their cognitive capacities with respect to particular truths. Yet, in the absence of evidence of serious cognitive impairment, it would be deeply problematic to claim that some people are epistemically well enough equipped to determine whether reliance on their cognitive capacities is preferable to guessing, whereas for others it makes little difference whether they rely on those capacities or merely guess. Accordingly, *pace* GBA, we are (*a posteriori*) entitled to believe that people without serious

cognitive impairment possess at least general-minimal reliability with respect to attaining truth.

(3) Another of our beliefs that seems true and for which we can find no defeater is the following: the community of philosophers is a *well-functioning epistemic community*. It is a largely meritocratic system in which the most capable experts lead the discussion while remaining responsive to the arguments and insights of less prominent members. Such a structure makes it likely that if you, exercising your generally and minimally reliable epistemic capacities, arrive at the truth of a philosophical proposition by producing a knockdown argument for it, then the leading experts—given the same basic epistemic capacities—would, in due course, recognize the force of your argument.

The fact that the community of philosophers has been able to recognize (non-substantive) knockdown arguments even from relative outsiders, as in the case of Gettier's well-known thought experiment, provides strong evidence that the community functions well. We, the authors, are not aware of any empirical evidence that goes against this claim. Thus, even after careful scrutiny, we find no defeater for the belief that the community of philosophers is indeed a well-functioning epistemic community—and, *pace* KBA, it does not pass blindly by the instances of philosophical knowledge.

(4) From (1), (2) and (3), we are (*a posteriori*) entitled to believe that the community of philosophers *would recognize* the philosophical truth if an individual with the same generally and minimally reliable epistemic capacity achieved it (for a more detailed argument see Bernáth–Tózsér 2025). Therefore, we are entitled to reject the epistemic inequality thesis and the extreme forms of skepticism entailed by KBA and GBA, so, *a fortiori*, we are entitled to reject KBA and GBA themselves.

In contrast with the trust in the community of philosophers and the epistemic equality thesis, the epistemic inequality thesis is entirely groundless, because neither epistemic entitlements support it nor evidence that is independent of the philosophical beliefs that the inequality thesis aims to protect. This groundlessness is especially troubling because it implies a “fearful symmetry”: proponents of KBA and GBA should see that, given the absence of any independent justification for claims of epistemic superiority, their philosophical opponents have just as much right to ascribe epistemic superiority to themselves as proponents of KBA and GBA do. Consequently, proponents of KBA and GBA should concede that, from a meta-epistemic perspective, the probability that they are epistemically superior to their opponents is no greater than the probability that they are epistemically inferior to them.

Our suspicion is that the acceptance of KBA and GBA ultimately rests on the assumption that there is simply no better alternative: if we do not accept some version of the epistemic inequality thesis—despite the fact that it is unsupported by any independent evidence—we will be led to epistemic collapse, that is, to the suspension of our substantive philosophical beliefs. As we have shown, however, PSP, by virtue of inalienable epistemic entitlements, is not only a coherent metaphilosophical position but also one that keeps skepticism within reasonable bounds. Therefore, *there is* a better alternative to the unfounded KBA and GBA, both of which unleash an extreme form of skepticism.

4.3 The Second Front: Arguments against the Excuse-Based Answer (EBA)

Here's our first argument against EBA. Take the following case.

Sam is a proponent of trope theory. He believes that reality is fundamentally composed of tropes: particular physical objects are bundles of tropes; causally relevant properties are tropes; the direct objects of perception are tropes; and so on. He has succeeded in eliminating all internal difficulties (inconsistencies) from his theory and has defended it against every known objection. Sam stands on the ground of EBA. He believes neither that his arguments for trope theory (or against its rivals) are compelling, nor that he enjoys any sort of epistemic grace. He sees his theory as one among many, takes it not to occupy any epistemically privileged status, and holds that he does not have sufficiently strong reason to trust that his belief that “reality is made up of tropes” is true, or even probably true. Nevertheless, Sam continues to maintain his belief in trope theory, saying (1) that trope theory alone is coherent with his core beliefs (“there are no abstract entities,” “there are no multilocalized entities,” “properties exist in their own right,” “composite objects exist”); and (2) that, since these core beliefs are central components of his cognitive framework, he is unable to suspend any of them; doing so would have extremely undesirable consequences for him.

Told in this way, the story seems entirely unobjectionable. However, the picture changes dramatically once we shift from a third-person to a *first-person perspective*. If we do so and make the relevant epistemic factors explicit, then the troubles immediately “disclose themselves”.

Why do I take trope theory as true rather than one of its rivals? Because it *alone is in equilibrium with* the core beliefs or pre-philosophical convictions that I *de facto* have (“there are no abstract entities”; “there are no multilocalized entities”; “properties exist in their own right”; “composite objects exist”). If you like, it *alone takes* my relevant basic truth-seemings and intuitions *at face value*. These “foundations,” however, enjoy *no* epistemically privileged status. They have *no greater* epistemic weight than the foundations of rival theories—they are *no more likely* to put me in touch with the truth than the foundations of rival theories are. Of course, I would like to say this: “I believe that reality is made up of tropes because, *given the way things are*, that is what I should to believe.” But all I can really say is this: “I believe that reality is made up of tropes because, *given my core beliefs and truth-seemings that I happen to have*, that is what I should to believe.” Yet the latter claim is, epistemically speaking, no different from the following: “I believe that reality is made up of tropes because, *given the outcome of a dice roll*, that is what I should to believe.”

This brief self-reflective monologue makes the point clear: if you do not believe that you have knockdown arguments for the truth of your substantive philosophical views, and if you do not believe that the core beliefs or truth-seemings on which those views rest are, by

virtue of some epistemic grace, more reliable than those of your rivals, then you are inevitably forced to live with this *epistemic uncertainty*. This uncertainty *cannot be eliminated*. To be sure, when you are “in the flow”, it fades from view. Yet in moments of self-reflection it *necessarily* reappears. But now let us change the question.

Why can I maintain my belief in the truth of trope theory? Because—even though I do not have sufficiently strong reason to trust that trope theory is true, or even probably true—it is not a live option for me to suspend the core beliefs on which it rests. These beliefs are so deeply entrenched that doubting their truth is psychologically impossible for me. Abandoning them would have extremely severe consequences—it would threaten the collapse of my entire cognitive framework. However, if the only reason I can offer for why I need not suspend my belief in the truth of trope theory consists in appealing to such excuses, then it means: those reasons of mine for which I maintain this belief as true are completely *irrelevant* in terms of whether I can maintain it or not. In other words, I can maintain this belief not because of the considerations in virtue of which I take it to be true—my truth-seemings, my core beliefs, and the first-order reasons grounded in them—but because of something wholly *independent* of its truth, namely, the fact that I have certain excuses for continuing to maintain it.

The lesson of this brief self-reflective monologue is that two things come apart and go their separate ways which ought to remain united: (1) your reasons for believing that *p* is *true*, and (2) your reasons for *maintaining* your belief that *p* is true. And this, let’s not mince words, is an epistemically *schizophrenic* state which *inevitably* accompanies you and cannot be eliminated. Of course, when you are caught up “in the flow,” it may fade from view—yet it *necessarily* reappears in moments of self-reflection.

Now, if we place side by side these two features disclosed in self-reflection—the unavoidable uncertainty and the unavoidable schizophrenia—the following picture emerges:

I believe that *p* because these and these are the core beliefs and truth-seemings I happen to have. These beliefs and seemings enjoy no epistemically privileged status—they are simply the ones that fate has dealt me. And I can continue to maintain my belief that *p* because I am incapable of suspending it—or because suspending it would be extraordinarily costly. This excuse has nothing whatsoever to do with the reasons for which I take *p* to be true.

Our claim, then, is this. EBA appears to be a phenomenologically viable option only at first glance. Self-reflection, however, makes it clear that we cannot maintain our beliefs by appealing solely to excuses—the epistemic uncertainty and schizophrenia that necessarily accompany EBA together *consume* belief itself (for a more detailed picture, see Tőzsér 2013, 129–148).

Let’s put the point somewhat bluntly. If you continue to maintain your substantive philosophical beliefs in the spirit of EBA, then there are two possibilities. The first is that you are simply not sufficiently self-reflective. The second—and more interesting—is that

you are sufficiently self-reflective and fully aware of everything we have said above about uncertainty and schizophrenia. In the latter case, your position begins to resemble that of the drunkard in *The Little Prince*. Recall the familiar exchange: “What are you doing here?”/ “I am drinking”/ “Why are you drinking?”/ “In order to forget”/ “To forget what?”/ “To forget that I am ashamed”/ “Ashamed of what?”/ “Ashamed of drinking!” The point is this: if you continue to maintain your substantive philosophical beliefs despite recognizing, in your most reflective moments, the schizophrenic nature of the attitude underlying EBA, then there is a good chance that you are fixated on grooming your philosophical pet theories in order to avoid acknowledging, time and again, that such meticulous attention to detail accomplishes very little—given the significant possibility that those theories are false. Accepting EBA in this case does not reflect an insufficient capacity for self-reflection, but rather the epistemic vice of intellectual cowardice and self-deception.



Our second argument is not phenomenological in nature but epistemic.

First, the key point is this: there is no *single*, *general*, and *gratis* excuse—rather, there are different kinds of excuses. This is because not every excuse fits the content of every substantive philosophical belief. For example, if you want to maintain the belief that “Introspection is fundamentally unreliable,” it would clearly be perverse to reason as follows: “I have an excuse for not suspending this belief, because it plays a central role in my system of beliefs, and therefore I am psychologically unable to give it up.” Likewise, if you want to maintain the belief that “What makes a choice right is its conformity with a moral norm,” it would be perverse to argue as follows: “Although I have a duty to suspend this belief, I have an excuse for not doing so, since doing so would have extremely bad consequences for me.” Similarly, if we want to maintain the belief that “Philosophy does not even stumble forward [...] does not move forward at all; it is exactly the same today as it was 3,000 years ago” (Dietrich 2011, 332), it would be perverse to say: “We have an excuse for not suspending this belief, since doing so would have harmful consequences for the community of philosophers, given that we know well that epistemic communities whose members have beliefs perform better than those that settle for acceptances and working hypotheses.”

All this means that excuses are *conditional*: excuses are *not necessarily genuine* excuses— the claim that “you have such and such an excuse for not discharging your obligation” can be false. But if that is so, then your alleged excuses *require justification*. At this point, you cannot once again appeal to your excuses by saying: “I merely have an excuse not to suspend the belief that my excuses are genuine.”

Moreover, the justification of the claim that your excuses are genuine cannot be arbitrary. An excuse is unproblematic only if it can be derived deductively from propositions that themselves require no further justification. In other words, the claim that an excuse is genuine must be supported by knockdown argument(s)—otherwise the original problem of EBA *re-emerges and iterates*. For if, in the end, there is no particular reason to believe that the

proposition describing your excuse is true, then on what basis do you maintain the belief that your excuse is genuine rather than merely a verbal maneuver?

In our view, you would not be able to adequately justify the claim that your excuses are genuine. Indeed, you yourself should agree that this cannot be done, for according to EBA, knockdown arguments for truth of substantive philosophical beliefs are not possible. There is little doubt that the question of when someone has an excuse for disregarding their epistemic obligations is itself a substantive philosophical issue, since it concerns what norms we ought to obey, and when we are permitted to deviate from them. However, and this is the crucial difficulty, if you cannot show that your excuse is genuine, then *there is too great a risk* that you are violating an inescapable epistemic obligation and thereby acting epistemically wrongly. In the absence of adequate justification, all you can say (and thus make your story “coherent”) is the following:

My first-order substantive philosophical beliefs are either true or false—and likewise, my excuses are either genuine or not. Let’s hope that, even if my first-order philosophical beliefs are entirely false, my excuses are at least genuine to absolve me before the Tribunal of Reason.

But even this hope is misplaced. Your excuses are unlikely to be genuine if your first-order substantive philosophical beliefs are false, since your reasoning about which excuses to adopt depends on which first-order philosophical beliefs you take to be most central.

More sharply: from the perspective of the excuse-based issue, EBA is nothing other than an epistemic search for an escape route—or, worse still, the manufacture of excuses. Of course, we understand your reluctance to suspend your cherished substantive philosophical beliefs. However, to quickly latch onto the theoretical possibility that you do not have to—because you cannot, or because it would come at too great a cost—does not, to put it mildly, appear to be an epistemically responsible attitude.

Behind EBA there is in fact the assumption that, since KBA and GBA do not work, we must settle for the “intellectual maintenance” (Gutting 2009, 225) of views that elaborate our core beliefs—and for appeals to our excuses. PSP, however, shows precisely that our system of beliefs can be grounded in central commitments whose abandonment is not, and could not be, subject to any inescapable epistemic obligation. In other words, PSP makes it clear that, beyond the *unjustified* assumption of epistemic inequality, reliance on *unjustified* excuses is not the only available option. Inalienable epistemic entitlements can also lie at the center of our philosophical outlook—entitlements for which *knockdown arguments* guarantee that we can never have inescapable epistemic obligations to give them up.

5. Doing Philosophy in the Spirit of Pyrrhonian Skepticism about Philosophy

Suppose we have shown that PSP does not undermine itself, since it is committed only to the truth of substantive propositions that anyone is inalienably entitled to believe. If so, then you must take AfD seriously—you can no longer dismiss it with the familiar response that, since PSP is self-defeating, its skeptical challenge may simply be ignored. Suppose, moreover, that we have exhaustively surveyed the reasons you can invoke to retain your substantive philosophical beliefs in the face of permanent disagreement, and that we have

shown each of these anti-skeptical strategies to fail. In that case, you would be forced to concede that PSP provides the correct account of the ethics of philosophical belief.

This, however, raises an important concern: does not the picture offered by PSP seem intellectually barren? Does not it foreclose too many otherwise exciting avenues of philosophical inquiry? In response, we would like to make three points.

First, PSP leaves ample room for precisely those philosophical activities at which the discipline has traditionally excelled: collecting and cataloguing trivial truths, uncovering facts about the history of philosophy, drawing conceptual distinctions, and—perhaps most importantly—producing knockdown arguments. The same general principle applies here as elsewhere. According to PSP, it remains worthwhile to pursue exactly those forms of argumentation that have yielded philosophy’s impressive trophy collection: knockdown arguments for conditional propositions, cost–benefit equations, and the falsity of highly detailed and specific philosophical views. Indeed, PSP requires us to abandon only those philosophical commitments that rest on failure—to suspend beliefs for which sufficiently strong support has not been secured. Everything else may remain part of philosophical practice.

Nevertheless, philosophy conducted in the spirit of PSP does exhibit a distinctive orientation that differentiates it from contemporary practice, though the difference amounts primarily to a shift in emphasis. In particular, PSP places special importance on the investigation of epistemic entitlements, especially inalienable ones, since the beliefs grounded in such entitlements ought to form the core of our system of beliefs.

Here, significant philosophical work remains to be done. We have inalienable epistemic entitlement to far more than the five propositions considered in this paper. The identification, articulation, and systematization of these entitlements therefore remains an important and promising area of philosophical inquiry.

More specifically, the claim is that we have epistemic entitlement to maintain our belief in any proposition whose truth is entailed, in one way or another, by the fact that epistemic agents are subject to inescapable epistemic obligations. Two broad categories of such entitlements can be distinguished. *A priori inalienable epistemic entitlements* concern beliefs in propositions whose truth follows *solely* from the fact that we are subject to inescapable epistemic obligations. In some cases, these propositions are necessary *consequences* of our having epistemic obligations. For example, if we are subject to epistemic obligations, then we must, in principle, be capable of epistemic wrongdoing. Hence, we are inalienably entitled to believe that “I am, in principle, capable of committing epistemic wrongdoing.” In other cases, the relevant propositions are necessary *conditions* for our having epistemic obligations in the first place. For example, we are entitled to believe that “I bear epistemic responsibility,” since only agents who bear epistemic responsibility can be subject to epistemic obligations (see Bernáth and Paár 2022).

In addition to these, there are *a posteriori epistemic entitlements*, which are grounded in inalienable epistemic entitlements *together with* seemings that have successfully withstood

thorough examination. These *a posteriori* entitlements are therefore only *quasi-inalienable*—in principle, the relevant seemings could turn out to be misleading, even if this is extremely unlikely. Moreover, they do not follow directly from the mere fact that we are subject to inescapable epistemic obligations.

This category includes not only beliefs such as that the community of philosophers is reliable or that the thesis of epistemic homogeneity of humanity is true, but also propositions that follow from such beliefs when combined with assumptions that are never seriously questioned independently. For example, the proposition that “There are other minds” follows from the thesis of epistemic homogeneity when it is combined with a rarely questioned proposition—supported by overwhelming empirical similarities among human beings—that “If the thesis of epistemic homogeneity is true, it is true partly because every human being possesses a mind”. It follows that, on the same grounds on which we are entitled to maintain our belief in the thesis of epistemic homogeneity, we are also epistemically entitled to maintain our belief in the existence of other minds.

Second, PSP’s vision of philosophy encompasses more than the investigation of consensual philosophical truths commonly supported by knockdown arguments and the study of the aforementioned inalienable and *a posteriori* epistemic entitlements. There is a further—admittedly delicate—case in which you can maintain a purely philosophical belief, even though it is neither supported by widespread consensus nor backed by an inalienable epistemic entitlement. According to WPC, you can maintain a belief for which you have, after thorough examination, developed a *novel* argument that has not yet become the subject of disagreement (see Frances 2016; Bernáth and Tózsér 2026). You may continue to maintain such a belief insofar as you can, in good faith, regard the argument in question as one that could turn out to be a knockdown argument.

This means that doing philosophy in the spirit of PSP encourages genuinely innovative inquiry. It invites philosophers to explore new topics, develop new argumentative strategies and open up new avenues of investigation. Whereas metaphilosophical views opposed to skepticism tend, in the final analysis, to be conservative with respect to philosophical practice (Aikin 2026), PSP not only preserves philosophy’s critical function but also actively encourages the ongoing reinvention of the discipline.

Third, PSP restores the Socratic ethos of philosophy. Throughout the history of philosophy, there has repeatedly been a tendency—following in the footsteps of Parmenides—to focus on questions of truth and theory construction, while neglecting the fact that, as Socrates emphasized, philosophy’s pursuit of truth must be inseparably connected to the cultivation of the proper attitude toward truth. Put more radically, what should be regarded as *first philosophy* is not metaphysics, but the *ethics of belief*, since the first question we must ask is which norms ought to govern the formation of our beliefs in our epistemic situation.

All of PSP’s theoretical opponents, in effect, bracket the question of the ethics of belief, taking on considerable risk, and hoping to achieve either truth or at least cognitive peace. Yet in doing so, they incur not only an *irrational* risk—since it is merely a matter of luck whether they achieve either truth or cognitive peace (think of the trouble of schizophrenia!)—but also a needless *normative* risk by disregarding the ethics of belief; namely, the risk of unknowingly becoming epistemic bad guys.

The avoidability of this risk is especially clear against the background of PSP. PSP can be understood as showing how you can consistently adhere to the ethics of belief without compromise, thereby avoiding even the suspicion of being epistemically at fault.

This Socratic ethos raises the suspicion that PSP is not primarily concerned with truth at all, but rather with avoiding epistemic wrongdoing. Its aim would not be epistemic success, but merely keeping your hands clean. Yet this suspicion rests on a misunderstanding. PSP does not so much advocate epistemic abstinence as insist that, despite the difficulty of the task, you should not give up the demand that nothing less than genuine, identifiable knockdown arguments will suffice. That is, you should not renounce the aspiration to grasp truth itself rather than merely its shadowy appearances.

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