

# DOES METAPHILOSOPHICALLY PRAGMATIST ANTI-SKEPTICISM WORK?

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ABSTRACT: Michael Hannon has recently given “a new *apraxia*” argument against skepticism. Hannon’s case is that skepticism depends on a theory of knowledge that makes the concept “useless and uninteresting.” Three arguments rebutting Hannon’s metaphilosophical pragmatism are given that show that the concept of knowledge that makes skepticism plausible is both interesting and useful.

KEYWORDS: skepticism, anti-skepticism, pragmatism, metaphilosophy

## 1.

Anti-skepticism comes in four flavors. There is (1) the quest of directly answering the skeptical challenges, (2) the program of showing that skepticism is self-defeating, (3) the line that the skeptic has artificially set the standards for knowledge (or other relevant epistemic property) too high, and then there is (4) the argument that skepticism yields objectionable practical results. Call these the *heroic*, *self-refutative*, *redefinitive*, and *pragmatic* arguments, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Of the pragmatic arguments against skepticism, there is a prominent subset that are best termed *apraxia* arguments – that were we to believe skepticism is true, then we would not be able to get on with our lives. The primary targets for the *apraxia* argument are skepticisms that require suspension of belief in light of the fact that few items of reflection survive skeptical scrutiny. Given that intentional action requires belief, skepticism stands in the way of one living one’s life. The skeptic, so the argument goes, is paralyzed.

The problem with the *apraxia* objection, as should be clear when stated so starkly, is that it does not follow that skepticism is *false* if it is *inconvenient*. In short: that the fact that a philosophical view that has bad practical consequences is not sufficient evidence that the view is false, but only that we should prefer it so.

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<sup>1</sup> See Scott Aikin and Thomas Dabay, “Pragmatist Anti-Skepticism: At What Cost?” in *The Mystery of Skepticism*, eds. Kevin McCain and Ted Poston (Leiden: Brill, 2018) for a short overview of these. Hannon invokes these four approvingly to locate his “new *apraxia* argument.”

Scott Aikin

Call this *the fallacy of inconvenience*. The *apraxia* argument, then, is better a *motivation for developing* anti-skeptical arguments of other stripes than itself being one.

Michael Hannon, in a recent essay, “Skepticism: Impractical, therefore Implausible,” announces that he will argue for “the *new apraxia* objection,” one that targets not the impractical results of the skeptic’s theoretical view, but rather the skeptic’s theoretical position as one that “goes against the very purpose of theoretical evaluation.”<sup>2</sup> His thesis is that *apraxia* arguments show that the skeptics’ views undercut the point of our concept of knowledge. And notice how the view, framed as such, does not yield the fallacy of inconvenience, since the practical edge of the argument is about how the concept is defined, not whether its applications are convenient or not. It is about *the point of the concept* of knowledge. Thus, a *metaphilosophically pragmatist anti-skepticism* – it is *pragmatist* anti-skepticism because it is a version of the *apraxia* argument, and it is *metaphilosophical* because it begins with a view about the point of philosophical reflections on knowledge.

I will argue here that Hannon’s argument has three complications, and I think that these complications should give us pause with the pragmatist anti-skeptical program. Instead, I think, what Hannon’s argument shows is something that skeptics have thought for a long time – that our epistemic concepts have a variety of equally plausible but inconsistent valences. Skepticism, then, isn’t just a first-order view about knowledge, but it’s a view about our views of knowledge, too. And so, a metaphilosophical skeptical defense of skepticism is in order. To close, I will outline reasons why the concept of knowledge behind skepticism is worth having.

## 2.

In order to avoid committing the fallacy of inconvenience, Hannon designs his argument to target some desiderata for a theory of knowledge. The thought is that if it can be shown that a theory fails some requirements of what we would hope for with a theory, we’ve shown that it fails as a theory. Those purposes are what Hannon calls “adequacy conditions” on a theory of knowledge. The basic structure of the argument works as follows:

1. A theory of knowledge is adequate only if it fits plausible assumptions about the point of having the concept of knowledge.
2. Skepticism does not fit plausible assumptions about the point of having the

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Hannon, “Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible,” *Philosophical Issues* 21, 1 (2019): 143-158.

## Does Metaphilosophically Pragmatist Anti-Skepticism Work?

concept of knowledge.

*Therefore*, skepticism is not an adequate theory of knowledge.

Hannon frames the argument as follows:

[S]kepticism is unable to underwrite the primary roles that our knowledge concept plays in epistemic evaluation. This is because skepticism has no connection to the practical circumstances that explain why we speak of knowing in the first place. On these grounds [...] skepticism should be regarded as an implausible theory of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

The two crucial elements of Hannon's argument are (i) making the case for the adequacy conditions, and (ii) showing that skepticism fails them. Hannon holds that there are four adequacy conditions connected to what might be called *the point of the concept of knowledge*.

The first is that "the primary function" of the concept of knowledge is "to identify reliable informants."<sup>4</sup> We use the concept *knowledge* and *knower* to distinguish those on whom we should rely from those who we should not. So, just as it would be silly to make it *too easy* to qualify as a knower, it would be equally pointless to make it *too hard* for people to qualify, too. The skeptical result with knowledge, as Hannon puts it, "runs against this [social-epistemological] approach, because it would frustrate our communal epistemic practices." If skepticism is right, then this social sorting point of the knowledge concept is frustrated, and "we have no use for such a concept."<sup>5</sup>

Hannon's second desideratum of a theory of knowledge is what he calls its "inquiry-stopping function." The basic thought is that upon meeting the conditions for knowledge, we may responsibly stop inquiring and get on with what we were doing. The concept of knowledge is useful because it serves as the limit for when inquiry has gone far enough. Hannon's reasoning, then, invokes a pragmatist point about inquiry:

[T]o continue to inquire beyond a certain point would be impractical: it would commit us to paying higher informational costs that are worth the lessened risk of being wrong.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hannon, "Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible," 145.

<sup>4</sup> Hannon, "Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible," 146.

<sup>5</sup> Hannon, "Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible," 5.

<sup>6</sup> Hannon, "Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible," 148. See also Michael Hannon, *What's the Point of Knowledge?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 215.

In short, Hannon's objection is that the skeptical theory of knowledge is bad economics with our limited epistemic resources – we, given the skeptic's program, would continue inquiry past all reasonable limits.

Hannon's third and fourth arguments are connected, as they are manifestations of the familiar *knowledge norms* – the norm of assertion and the norm of action. Hannon captures the norm of assertion as follows:

Suppose, first, that you are in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p if (and perhaps only if) you know that p. If skepticism were true, then assertions could almost never be epistemically warranted [...] But such a result seems obviously intolerable from a practical standpoint, because we often have urgent needs for communicating information.<sup>7</sup>

The norm of action has a similar role:

[A]ssume that you are in a good position to rely on p in practical reasoning if (and perhaps only if) you know that p. If skepticism were true, your justification would almost never provide a sufficient basis for practical reasoning.

The problem, as Hannon puts it, is “we are still faced with the unavoidable need to act,” and so “there is practical pressure to think knowledge is the relevant norm only if skepticism is false.”<sup>8</sup> The result is that with both assertions and actions consequent of practical reasoning, skepticism renders those activities “impossible unless we constantly violated the epistemic norms governing those practices.”<sup>9</sup> The skeptic, in short, would have a theory of our practices that makes it so that we never properly practice them. The problem, then, is in what sense these would be *practices* at all? The turn, then, is that skepticism's theory of knowledge is unsupported – it's not clear what it would be a theory of.<sup>10</sup>

Hannon's overall argument is that given these four convergent arguments, we have reason to be committed to the claim that skepticism is “implausible because it is impractical,” since “it goes against the point of epistemic evaluation.”<sup>11</sup> That is, the conception of knowledge that would make skepticism look plausible is a conception of knowledge that has no purpose. As Hannon frames it, “Either the purpose of knowledge is such that it rules out skepticism or else knowledge is a useless and uninteresting concept.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hannon, “Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible,” 149.

<sup>8</sup> Hannon, “Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible,” 149.

<sup>9</sup> Hannon, “Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible,” 149.

<sup>10</sup> Hannon, *What's the Point of Knowledge?*, 218.

<sup>11</sup> Hannon, “Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible,” 156.

<sup>12</sup> Hannon, “Skepticism: Impractical, Therefore Implausible,” 149.

3.

It should be clear why Hannon's classifies his argument as a form of *pragmatist* anti-skepticism, and I believe it should be clear why it is, in the end, a *metaphilosophically pragmatist* argument, too – it is about *the point* of our concepts and what our theories about those concepts must be in the service of, namely, effective practice. The anti-skeptical challenge amounts to asking why we would conceive knowledge in such a way that would make skepticism plausible. Hannon's four cases are reasons to conceive knowledge otherwise.

I believe there are three metaphilosophical defenses for the skeptic here, and the first begins with an historical explanation. Skepticism, classically, was not a free-standing philosophical tradition – it was one that was a critical reply to the 'dogmatic' philosophical traditions around it. Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticisms were internal critiques of Stoic and Epicurean epistemology.<sup>13</sup> The Stoics required that knowledge begin with *kataleptic* impressions, which had not only to be true, but they had to be caused by what they represented and could not be confused with false impressions. And so, it was from Stoic epistemology that skeptics found reason to propose indiscernibility cases. And the same goes for the Epicureans. They held that all sensations are true, and so they were ripe for the problem of perceptual variance. But this point generalizes – philosophical theories that require significant revision to how we live, what we think of ourselves and the world, and how we conceive of the good must propose accounts of how these things are known. And in particular, they must explain further how we know these things when others do not. Revisionary philosophical programs then require high-grade standards for knowledge, otherwise they cannot explain why we should follow their dictates instead of those of our unenlightened fellows.

So, the historical point is that the theory of knowledge the skeptics use had itself been derived from going non-skeptical epistemologies. And there is a reason to have such high-grade requirements – reflection on what knowledge is (and other core concepts to our lives, such as beauty, the good, reality, and justice) requires that high-grade requirement, as when that requirement is satisfied, it provides powerful reason for changing our lives for the better. And so, I believe, the historical explanation yields the first response favoring the skeptics – the clarification of the concept of knowledge allows us the tools to identify things we can be confident in, things worth changing our lives in light of. And so, this historical defense is not just a defense of skepticism in particular, but it is a defense

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<sup>13</sup> See Scott Aikin, "Skeptics against Epicureans and Stoics on the Criterion," in *The Routledge Handbook for Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Kelly Arenson (New York: Routledge, 2020) 191-203.

of any program of significant revision of our concepts and re-orienting of our lives. You don't need merely what passes for knowledge, but the high-grade stuff that *really is knowledge*.

The skeptics deny that we have any of that high-grade knowledge stuff, but it's not out of their desire to be obtuse that they say so. Rather, it's out of the pursuit and complications in the pursuit of that epistemic good that they say it. It is an unhappy result, but it is not one that is simply *pointless*.

The second skeptical defense falls hard on the heels of the first historical line of argument. It opens with the questions: Are we so sure what the point of our concept of knowledge is, to begin with? Is the point one that entails that there are instances? Notice that all of Hannon's four cases require that the point of the concept entails that there are instances that get sorted as successful. Hannon's challenge is that if the concept of knowledge does not yield instances in these four domains, then it is "pointless" or "uninteresting." But notice that there are many concepts that have an aspirational edge that have no guarantees of instances. Take *justice* for example. Imagine someone to have a theory of justice that is demanding, perhaps so demanding that there are no states or laws that, at the end of analysis, satisfy its requirements. So it follows that, on this theory of justice, there are no just states or laws. If this were a well-motivated theory, this result, I think, would be *supremely interesting*. Ask any philosophical anarchist. Or consider a theory of what it takes for something to be morally good. If, again, the theory were well-motivated but yielded a nihilism of good actions and agents, that would be, again, supremely interesting. Ask anyone who asks critical questions about moral saints. And we can do this with other simple notions like *scholarly duties*, *parental care*, and *teacherly excellence* – there seems to be no upper limit on what we can do in their service to perform them. Surely it is useful to have a theory that captures that notion that our tasks are incomplete, even when we've done our right best. We may be blameless for leaving off, but that does not mean we've satisfied the demands of the task. The same, as I see it, can be said of knowledge, too. And not only, I believe, is it *interesting*, but it's *useful*.

One way to capture the usefulness of these concepts is to turn back to Hannon's fallibilist alternative to skepticism. Now, the skeptics, too, were fallibilists (particularly the Academics) – but fallibilists about *reasonable belief*, not knowledge. Academics distinguished between three levels of worthiness of assent for impressions: (a) plausible, (b) plausible and tested, and (c) plausible, tested, and stable. In these various instances, we can more reasonably assent, act, take as reliable, and (temporarily) discontinue inquiry, but we don't need to concept of

knowledge to do so.<sup>14</sup> The lesson is that we need only these degreed notions of reasonable belief to perform these acts. We need the concept of knowledge to explain why these cases aren't always right – namely, that though we had good reasons to do what we did, we nevertheless didn't *know*. And we have a way to explain why we do not just close inquiry, but that we re-open it – namely, that though we had good reasons, we nevertheless did not know. The concept of knowledge, then, plays a regulative role on our notions of responsible practice for the skeptics, and it does have a purpose.

The third and final metaphilosophical defense of skepticism is simply from the following counterfactual. *Skeptical challenges would not be so easily posed if skeptics used an alien or confabulated concept of knowledge*. The regress problem is posed by five-year-olds, but it's the *anti-skeptics* that have to do the fancy philosophical footwork to say what went wrong (and, by the way, they don't say all the same thing!). Disagreement skeptics need only the notion of *has the same evidence* to pose their challenge, but it's the anti-skeptics that have to say complicated (and sometimes pretty dogmatic) things to avoid skeptical results. Not one viewer of *The Matrix* had to be taught the closure principle to wonder if they, too, were in the Matrix. Who is doing the conceptual re-engineering here? I note all of this to highlight the fact that the high-grade concept of knowledge, the one that makes skepticism possible but also the idea that we can have profound insight, too, is a useful, interesting, and familiar notion. It allows us to, even when we are very sure, to state our lingering doubts, it keeps us intellectually humble, and it drives us to improve. That ain't nothing.

#### 4.

Michael Hannon has given what he calls 'the new *apraxia* argument' against skepticism. Hannon's core thesis is that a theory of knowledge must not run afoul of why the concept of knowledge is useful, and he outlines four desiderata. They are that the concept of knowledge is (1) for identifying reliable cognitive resources, (2) for closing inquiry, and for (3) asserting and (4) practical reasoning. Since skepticism is the view that there are no instances of knowledge, the concept of knowledge is rendered without use. Since we nevertheless *do* perform these actions, we should reorient the concept of knowledge. Hannon's metaphilosophical pragmatist program can be answered by three metaphilosophical arguments in favor of the concept of knowledge that makes skepticism plausible. The first is that

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<sup>14</sup> See Sextus Empiricus's account of Academic skeptical fallibilism in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I.227-230 and Cicero's at *Academica* 2.66-8.

Scott Aikin

skeptics use the concept of knowledge that drives any revisionary philosophical program – we need an epistemically high-grade notion of knowledge to explain the basis on which we reorient ourselves. Second, all four of Hannon’s desiderata for the concept of knowledge can be, given Academic fallibilism, handled by the gradable notion of reasonable belief, and the concept of knowledge instead plays a regulative role over those functions. Third, and finally, there is clear evidence that the concept of knowledge that makes skepticism plausible is familiar and considerably less controversial than the going products of anti-skeptical re-engineering programs. This, of course, is not an argument for skepticism, but rather a rebutting case against the pragmatist case for throwing out the high-grade notion of knowledge that makes skepticism plausible.