

# The Archimedean Urge

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## 1. Genealogical Scepticism

In Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, Socrates orders his hapless student Strepsiades to lie down on a couch to make him more receptive to philosophical inspiration. Instead he catches Strepsiades masturbating under the bedclothes. Aristophanes' suggestion is that it amounts to much the same thing. Like philosophy, scepticism about philosophy has its modes and fashions. Sometimes the accusation, as with Aristophanes, is that a seemingly lofty activity is in fact chicanery, nonsense in the service of all too human desire. According to the sort of diagnostic scepticism associated with the later Wittgenstein, philosophy is a symptom of pathology or confusion. Scientistic scepticism impugns philosophy for falling short of some putative standard met by all respectable – that is, empirical – modes of enquiry. What we might call 'genealogical' scepticism complains that the building blocks of philosophy – the judgments and concepts on which it all hangs – are contingent features of whoever it is who is doing the philosophising: her or his particular history, culture, language, education, gender, character.

Coming to terms with the genealogical contingency of thought has been a preoccupation of the European intellectual tradition since the mid-18th century. German historicists like Herder and Humboldt taught Europeans to think historically about thought itself, to see historical inquiry as a historically circumscribed endeavour rather than an unencumbered encounter with the hard facts of the past. Hegel applied this historicist lesson to philosophy: as “each child is in any case a *child of his time*...thus, philosophy, too, is *its own time comprehended* in thoughts” (1820/1991, 21). In turn, German historicism lay the groundwork for Nietzsche, from whom we have the term ‘genealogy’ in the sense in which I’ve been using it – as applying not to people but to beliefs, values and concepts – as well as the most famous example of a sceptical genealogy: the genealogy of bourgeois, Christian morality we find in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>1,2</sup> Here Nietzsche tells us that our system of morality has its true origins not in human goodness or divine providence, but in an interplay of more lowly forces: the *ressentiment* of slaves against their masters, the debtor-creditor relation, and the desire of the priestly caste to dominate. In Nietzsche we see the fulfilment of what Robert Brandom calls the “revenge of Enlightenment naturalism on Enlightenment rationalism” (m.s. 3). That is, Nietzsche’s genealogy showed how the kind of scientific, naturalised explanation that was the hallmark of the Enlightenment could be used to undermine the great idol of the Enlightenment, man’s capacity for rational thought.

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<sup>1</sup> I don’t mean to suggest that Nietzsche was the first to think this way. Bernard Williams argues that in Book 2 of *Republic*, Plato has Socrates reject the genealogical accounts of justice put forward by Glaucon and Adeimantus because he thinks they would undermine the intrinsic value of justice (Williams 2002). And we of course see similar sceptical tendencies in Hobbes’, Hume’s and Toland’s writings on religion. Xenophanes of Kolophon is perhaps the most amusing early example of genealogical unmasking:

Mortals suppose that the gods are born (as they themselves are), and that they wear man’s clothing and have human voice and body. But if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own—horses like horses, cattle like cattle (1898, fragments 5-6).

<sup>2</sup> Though Nietzsche, ever elusive, also wrote: “The origin becomes of less significance in proportion as we acquire insight into it; whilst things nearest to ourselves, around and within us, gradually begin to manifest their wealth of colours, beauties, enigmas, and diversity of meaning, of which earlier humanity never dreamed” (1881/1911 I:44).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, sceptical genealogies have taken a variety of forms: French historical epistemology as practiced by Bachelard, Canguilhem, and most famously Foucault; feminist and subaltern unmasking of patriarchal and imperialist ideologies; psychoanalytic diagnoses of everything from architectural forms to Zionism. Indeed much of the intellectual history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might be told in terms of a war between those committed to historicist or naturalistic genealogical excavation and those, like Karl Popper and Leo Strauss, who thought such excavation not just alethically irrelevant but ethically pernicious. Indeed one might think – or at least I think – that the ‘two cultures’ of the modern intellectual world are no longer, as C.P. Snow once suggested, the humanities and the sciences, but rather those on one hand who think that everything must be genealogised, and on the other, those who think that there is nothing to be learned from genealogy.

For most of its short history analytic philosophy has been on the side that thinks there not much point to revelations of genealogical contingency. After all, we believe everything we do because of contingent facts about ourselves: that we exist at all, that we were born where and when we were, that we received the education we did, that we formed the concepts that are required to entertain certain propositions. The mere fact that a belief or practice (philosophy included) has a contingent origin does not entail that it is false or unjustified; to think otherwise is to commit the genetic fallacy. But things are shifting. Genealogical scepticism about philosophy, or at least one or more of its domains, is increasingly common amongst philosophers. Many contemporary ethicists claim that the evolutionary origins of our moral judgments demand that we abandon or revise those judgments – or at least adopt an anti-realist construal of their contents (Harman 1977, 1986; Singer 1981, 2005; Ruse 1985; Ruse and Wilson 1986; Gibbard 1990; Kitcher 2005, 2011; Joyce 2006, ch. 6; Street 2006, 2008, 2011; Greene 2008; Huemer 2008; Rosenberg 2011.)<sup>3</sup> James Ladyman and Don Ross (2007) argue that the evolutionary origins of our metaphysical judgments

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<sup>3</sup> With the same logic but in a different spirit, Thomas Nagel (2012) infers from what he takes to be the incompatibility of an evolutionary account of moral judgment with moral realism that the evolutionary explanation must be false.

should make us suspicious of their reliability. Genealogically-motivated arguments have also been launched against realism in math (Benacerraf 1973; Field 1989) and logic (Cooper 2003), theism (Dennett 2006)<sup>4</sup> and naturalism (Plantinga 1993, ch. 12, 1994, 2002). And the new sub-discipline of ‘experimental philosophy’ is in part devoted to arguing that people’s judgments about epistemology, ethics, philosophy of language and metaphysics systematically vary with culture, gender, socioeconomic status and extent of philosophical training – and thus that these judgments should be cleansed from philosophical practice (for an overview, see Knobe and Nichols 2008, 2014; and Alexander 2012).<sup>5,6</sup>

What should we make of such genealogical scepticism about philosophical judgment? No doubt many find it intuitively compelling. Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols predict that encountering the results of experimental philosophy will cause in philosophers a

...crisis akin to that of the [Christian] child confronted with religious diversity...For the discovery of religious diversity can prompt the thought that it’s in some sense accidental that one happens to be raised in a Christian household rather than a Hindu household. This kind of arbitrariness can make the child wonder whether there’s any reason to think that his religious beliefs are more likely to be right than those of the Hindu child...And just as some Christian children come to think that there’s no rational basis for preferring Christian to

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<sup>4</sup> Genealogical attacks on theism have a particularly storied pedigree. See Feuerbach 1841; Marx 1844; Nietzsche 1887; Freud 1927.

<sup>5</sup> Not all of experimental philosophy participates in this sceptical project; much of it is focused on using empirical methods to address first-order philosophical issues, usually in philosophy of mind and action and moral psychology. Jesse Prinz (2008) suggests using the term ‘empirical philosophy’ for this non-sceptical part of experimental philosophy, and reserving the label ‘experimental philosophy’ for the empirically-driven critique of philosophical judgment. I will follow Prinz in his use of the terms ‘experimental philosophy’ and ‘experimental philosophers’.

<sup>6</sup> A related topic is the much discussed issue of *peer disagreement*. Proponents of so-called ‘conciliatory’ or ‘split-the-difference’ views on peer disagreement sometimes suggest that peer disagreement constitutes some sort of genealogical evidence: specifically, evidence about the unreliability of one’s belief-forming mechanism. But not all discussions of peer disagreement treat it as an issue about genealogy. So for the most part I set it aside. See my paper with John Hawthorne (2013) for a discussion of the disagreement debate.

Hindu beliefs, we too might come to think that there's no rational basis for preferring Western philosophical notions to Eastern ones (2008, 11).

As a descriptive matter, Knobe and Nichols might well be right. (Indeed we need not imagine some hypothetical encounter with experimental philosophy. Anyone who has taught a first-year undergraduate philosophy course will likely be familiar with this sort of sceptical response.) But the tacit normative claim here – that philosophers *ought* to experience such a crisis of faith – is far more vexed. Not every crisis is rational. And not every revelation of genealogical contingency undermines judgment. My judgment that Paris is the capital of France is contingent on the fact that I exist, that I possess the concepts *Paris* and *France*, and that I have been taught that the capital of France is Paris. And yet none of these revelations of genealogical contingency seem to undermine my claim to know that Paris is the capital of France. If they do, we have entered a realm of wholesale scepticism, in which none of my judgments are secure. Such wholesale scepticism is presumably not to the taste of most genealogical sceptics. After all, their scepticism appears to be based on facts that they take themselves to *know* – namely, that our philosophical judgments have the particular genealogies (in evolutionary history, or culture, or education) they do (cf. Bealer 1992; Foley 1998; Sosa 1998, 2005; Tidman 1996; Yablo 1993). Such sceptics must do more than merely reveal that our philosophical judgments are genealogically contingent. They must show us why the kind of genealogical contingency exhibited by (some or all) philosophical judgments *should* cause a crisis of faith, without thereby debunking all claims to knowledge, especially their own.

Epistemologists have written about the difficulty of finding a plausible epistemological principle that can vindicate genealogical scepticism while avoiding global scepticism (Srinivasan 2009, White 2010; cf. Elga m.s., Vavova m.s. and Schechter m.s.). In §2 I rehearse the reasons for so thinking, with the hope of bringing out an overlooked dimension of this debate: namely, that any plausible argument for genealogical scepticism rests on contested first-order

epistemological premises – premises that some philosophers find intuitively attractive while others do not.<sup>7</sup> This is despite the claim, made by some genealogical sceptics, to take an Archimedean view of philosophy, one that inhabits the philosophically neutral perspectives of sociology, history, science or commonsense.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately no such Archimedean stance is available. To argue against philosophy on the grounds of genealogical contingency requires taking a stance within epistemology, and thus within philosophy itself. And, as genealogical sceptics themselves are keen to point out, *which* stances people take within philosophy (including epistemology) is in part a matter of genealogical contingency. One's judgments about the epistemological premises required by any plausible argument for genealogical scepticism – judgments about explanation, evidence, justification, defeat, methods, bootstrapping and so on – are presumably as shaped by background factors (one's culture, or the nature of extent of one's philosophical training) as the philosophical judgments that genealogical sceptics wish to impugn. If so, then genealogical scepticism faces the spectre of self-defeat. The genealogical sceptic cannot, by his own lights, have reason to accept his argument's conclusion – and nor can he offer us any reason for accepting it, either. Or so I will argue in §2.

In §3 I ask: where does this leave us? Many have argued that once we note that there is no epistemologically plausible argument for genealogical scepticism, our work is done. And my point about self-defeat might seem to put a final nail in the coffin: even if we could find an epistemologically plausible argument for

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<sup>7</sup> Knobe and Nichols' analogy between the genealogical contingency of religious belief and the genealogical contingency of philosophical judgments is apt, but not for the reasons they suppose. Over two decades of philosophical debate about the rationality of religious exclusivism – whether one *ought* to have a 'crisis of faith' in light of the genealogical contingency of one's religious belief – reveal just how subtle the epistemological issues in play are. See e.g. Smith 1976; Hick 1980, 1982, 1989, 2001; Gutting 1982; Plantinga 1986, 1993, 1995, 2000; Alston 1988a; Runzo 1988; Silver 2001; Willard 2001.

<sup>8</sup> The philosophical use of the metaphor of the Archimedean lever – about which, Archimedes (according to Pappus of Alexandria) famously said, "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the Earth" – has a long history. See for example Descartes 1641/1993, 17; Arendt 1958, VI. 36; Rawls 1971, 261; Berlin 1979, 114–15; Williams 1985, ch. 2; Dworkin 1996. Thanks largely to Dworkin, the notion of 'Archimedeanism' in philosophy is now usually taken to indicate a particular view in moral philosophy, namely that a meaningful distinction can be drawn between first-order normative claims and meta-ethical claims. I mean to use the notion in a broader way.

genealogical scepticism, that argument would at best be thought plausible only by *some* – those who share some particular genealogy – and thus would be self-defeating. But I myself don't share the view that genealogical scepticism can be so easily dismissed. Just because the genealogical sceptic can offer us no reason, by his own lights, to accept his conclusion, doesn't entail that his conclusion is false. Moreover, there is the serious risk that the genealogical sceptic's argument is a successful *ad hominem* attack, showing us how our own epistemological framework undermines itself from within. The worry is that it is by *our own lights* that our philosophical judgments are impugned. What we need is stable ground: a positive picture of what knowledge requires, and we're doing when we do philosophy, that resistant to genealogical scepticism. I will end this paper with some thoughts on what such a picture might amount to.

## 2. Arguments for Genealogical Scepticism

I now turn to the task of laying out possible arguments for genealogical scepticism, with the hope of showing why, plausibly, they are self-defeating. I will discuss five arguments: the argument from insensitivity, the argument from explanatory inertness, the argument from coincidence, the argument from probability on the evidence, and the argument from unreliability. I don't mean the discussion here to be exhaustive. I mean merely to draw out the contentious epistemological premises that are involved in the most plausible or common arguments for genealogical scepticism; I take it that a similar trick can be performed for further variations on the same argumentative theme.

Two brief notes. For the sake of convenience I lay out these arguments as if they are attacks on philosophical judgment in general, although genealogical sceptics typically concede that some (or many) domains of philosophical judgment are immune from sceptical attack. Also for convenience I focus primarily on genealogical scepticism that is motivated by findings of cultural variation, though what I say can be easily extended to genealogical scepticism that is motivated instead by evolutionary, psychological or historical contingency.

## 2.1 Insensitivity

To simplify matters, let us suppose that you belong to a particular group – let’s call it ‘Westerners’ – the members of which share all the same philosophical judgments. Meanwhile, the members of a distinct group – ‘Easterners’ – share all the opposing philosophical judgments. For example, you and all your fellow Westerners share the judgment that Gettier’s Jones doesn’t know, while Easterners all share the judgment that Jones does know.<sup>9</sup> And you and your fellow Westerners share Kripkean judgments about reference while Easterners share non-Kripkean judgments.<sup>10</sup> And so on. It follows that for each philosophical judgment, one group is right and the other wrong.<sup>11</sup> Now suppose a sceptic argues as follows: “Take any one of your philosophical judgments, for example your judgment that Gettier’s Jones doesn’t know. The empirical evidence shows that people’s judgments about Gettier cases are caused by their cultural upbringing rather than by the truth about those cases. This means that even if Jones *did* know (holding the other facts of the Gettier case fixed), you would still believe he didn’t know!” The sceptic is in effect arguing that your Gettier judgment is *insensitive* to the truth, where S’s judgment that  $p$  is sensitive just in case, if  $p$  were false, S wouldn’t believe  $p$ , and thus that your judgment doesn’t constitute knowledge.<sup>12,13</sup> Here is a generalisation of the argument:

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<sup>9</sup> This is an exaggerated version of the result claimed by Weinberg, Nichols and Stich 2003. For a critical discussion of those results, see Nagel, J. 2012. For a more recent and comprehensive empirical study that suggests that the Gettier intuition is in fact cross-culturally robust, see Machery et al (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> This is an exaggerated version of the result claimed by Machery et al. 2004.

<sup>11</sup> I’m assuming a realist construal of the subject matter of philosophical judgment, rather than a view on which philosophy involves mere conceptual analysis. (Of course one might be a realist and think that conceptual analysis is sometimes a useful *means* towards understanding, e.g. knowledge itself.) I’m also assuming that every philosophical proposition – or at least the ones believed by Westerners and Easterners – is either true or false.

<sup>12</sup> To avoid spurious counterexamples, sensitivity is usually relativised to methods. I’ll ignore this complication here.

<sup>13</sup> Another complication: applying a sensitivity condition to philosophical judgments involves evaluating counterfactuals with necessarily false antecedents, since (presumably) the propositions that are the typical contents of philosophical judgments are, if true, necessarily true. Thus, on a standard treatment of counterfactuals, sensitivity will be vacuously satisfied for all true philosophical judgments (Lewis 1973, 24–5.) If so, then even if sensitivity is a genuine condition on knowledge, the following argument will not be sound (cf. Nozick 1981, 322, 342ff). I ignore



### Argument from Insensitivity (AI)

- (1) Your philosophical judgments are insensitive to the truth
- (2) Sensitivity is a condition on knowledge
- (3) Therefore, your philosophical judgments don't constitute knowledge

(AI) certainly enjoys a *prima facie* appeal, at least for some suitable refinement of 'philosophical judgments'.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, many will reject (AI) on the grounds that (2) has unacceptable sceptical consequences. Take my belief that I am not a handless-brain-in-a-vat. If I were a handless-brain-in-a-vat, I would still believe that I wasn't a handless-brain-in-a-vat. So my belief that I'm not a handless-brain-in-a-vat is insensitive to the truth of the belief. If (2) is true, then I do not know that I am not a handless-brain-in-a-vat. If closure holds,<sup>15</sup> then it is also follows that I do not know that I have hands – or indeed very much else.

What's the upshot? First, those philosophers who already reject sensitivity as a condition on knowledge will presumably be left cold by (AI); insofar as genealogical scepticism is just a version of traditional wholesale scepticism, most philosophers will take themselves to have good independent reason reject it. Second, genealogical sceptics themselves have reason to reject sensitivity, and thus (AI), insofar as they themselves are not global sceptics.<sup>16</sup> Third, as an empirical matter, it's plausible that judgments about sensitivity are themselves genealogically contingent in a way that makes them susceptible to (AI). Indeed,

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this complication here, granting for the sake of argument that our philosophical judgments are indeed insensitive.

<sup>14</sup> For versions of (AI) directed against moral realism see Blackburn 1985, 16-18 and Williams 1985, 143, 151. Susan Hurley puts forward what she takes to be the best version of the evolutionary debunking argument against moral knowledge along sensitivity lines, though she ultimately endorses a non-sensitivity theory of epistemic justification (1989, ch. 14).

<sup>15</sup> Specifically, single-premise closure under known implication, viz. if I know  $p$ , and I know that  $p$  entails  $q$ , then I know  $q$ .

<sup>16</sup> Assuming they do not wish to reject closure. That said, it's not entirely clear what it would look like to accept sensitivity but deny closure for philosophical knowledge, as Nozick would have us do for empirical propositions. Perhaps it would turn out that we could not know general propositions like *descriptivism about reference is false* but we could know more specific propositions like '*Gödel doesn't refer to Schmidt* – the idea being that the closest world in which '*Gödel doesn't refer to Schmidt*' is false is, e.g., a world in which Gödel and Schmidt are the same person.

according to Weinberg, Nichols and Stich (2003), Westerners are more likely than South Asians to accept traditional, brain-in-a-vat style arguments.<sup>17</sup> Thus insofar as a Westerner finds herself inclined to accept (AI) she might worry that her judgment that (2) is true is itself insensitive, tracking not the truth of its content but rather just the contingencies of her upbringing. If so, then (AI) impugns commitment to its own premises.

## 2.2 Explanatory Inertness

A second form of genealogical scepticism focuses on the supposed *explanatory inertness* of the (putative) truth of our philosophical judgments. According to this line of argument, our philosophical judgments are entirely explained by genealogies that make no mention of their truth; this in turn implies that we have no reason to believe that our philosophical judgments are correct. Take again our simplified case, in which you and your fellow Westerners share some philosophical judgment  $p$  while Easterners share the judgment not- $p$ . We might think that the complete explanation of why you believe  $p$  rather than not- $p$  is that you were born a Westerner rather than an Easterner. Contrast the complete explanation of why I believe there is a computer in front of me. Presumably that explanation will involve the fact that there is a computer in front of me, causing me to have certain visual sensations that in turn lead to the formation of my computer-belief. So unlike the explanation of your judgment that  $p$ , the explanation of my computer-judgment mentions the truth of that judgment. Here is a generalisation of the argument:

### Argument from Explanatory Inertness (AEI)

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<sup>17</sup> In addition, the PhilStudies Survey ([www.philpapers.org/surveys](http://www.philpapers.org/surveys)) has a wealth of information about the correlations between level of philosophical training and views on external world scepticism. The general tendency seems to be that the more philosophical training one has, the less likely one is to be an external world sceptic (22.6% of undergraduates say they lean toward or accept external world scepticism, while only 8.0% of graduates and 7.1% of faculty members/those with PhD's say the same). Within the group of faculty members/ PhD's, those who specialise in epistemology tend to have a higher than average acceptance of external world scepticism: 10.4%. Of those faculty members/PhD's who specialise in Continental philosophy, 11.4% lean toward or accept external world scepticism.

- (7) Your philosophical judgments can be explained without mention of their putative truth
- (8) When a judgment can be explained without mention of its (putative) truth, then that judgment is unjustified
- (9) Therefore, your philosophical judgments are unjustified

Many have found (AEI) attractive, especially when ‘philosophical judgments’ is restricted to ethical judgments (Harman 1977, Joyce 2006; cf. Street 2006, 114). As Harman writes: “Moral hypotheses do not help explain why people [make the moral judgments they do]. So ethics is problematic and nihilism must be taken seriously” (ibid., 11). (AEI) might be thought similarly compelling when applied to non-ethical philosophical judgments. The complete explanation of why you or I have the epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetic etc. judgments we do – in the terms of evolutionary psychology, or neuroscience, or sociology – will, we might suppose, make no mention of the *truth* of those judgments. So it turns out that epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics and so on are problematic, and nihilism about those domains is to be taken seriously.

What should we make of (AEI)? (7) will naturally come under pressure for any domain of philosophical judgment whose content is thought to be causally connected to judgments in that domain. Ethical naturalists, for example, identify moral properties (e.g. goodness) with causally efficacious non-moral properties (e.g. being conducive to human welfare). This identity secures, in turn, the causal efficacy of the moral properties. So, assuming ethical naturalism, it is possible that the complete causal explanation of my moral judgments does in fact mention the moral truths. To claim, as Harman does, that the complete explanation of our moral judgments doesn’t actually feature moral facts might be thought to beg the question against the ethical naturalist.<sup>18</sup> Take again my judgment that there is a computer in front of me. A sceptic about my computer

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Joyce argues that Harman’s point is not that there are no moral facts, but more subtly, that if there is no naturalistic reduction of moral facts, then there are none (2006, 184–5). Thus Joyce’s own version of the explanatory inertness argument involves a putative refutation of ethical naturalism. I will take the standard line on Harman – that is, that he offers an argument for moral nihilism. My apologies if this turns out to be a misrepresentation.

judgment might argue as follows: “You believe there’s a computer in front of you just because of a particular configuration of your brain states that makes it *seem* to you that you are having the visual impression of a computer. This explanation makes no mention of the putative fact that there really *is* a computer in front of you. Therefore you are unjustified in believing that there is a computer in front of you.”<sup>19</sup> Harman might protest the analogy. He might argue that this is simply *not* the complete explanation of my judgment that there is a computer in front of me, for there is in fact a causal connection between there being a computer in front me and my judgment that there is. But to assume, as Harman does, that a similar protest might not be launched against his scepticism about moral judgment is to beg the question against the ethical naturalist. For *if* there is an appropriate causal connection between my moral judgments and the moral truths, then the complete explanation of my moral judgments will feature the truth of those judgments.

We can generalise this dialectical observation. Insofar as one thinks that the philosophical domain under sceptical pressure is causally active, one will deny that it is explanatorily inert – and thus will think that judgments in that domain can be robust against (AEI). For example, those who think that there exists a strong continuity between metaphysics or philosophy of mind and the natural sciences (and who are realists about the natural sciences) will likely think that the truth of their judgments in those philosophical domains should be explained in ways not dissimilar to explanations of true scientific judgments.<sup>20</sup>

That said, many philosophers are realists about domains of philosophical judgment that they think causally inert. Many are realists about ethics, epistemology and math without thinking that ethical, epistemic and mathematical properties are causally efficacious. Nonetheless, such philosophers might deny that judgments in these domains are undermined by (AEI). They

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<sup>19</sup> A different form of explanatory scepticism about computers might take its cue from the mereological nihilism of Trenton Merricks (2001) or Ted Sider (2014).

<sup>20</sup> For discussions of the extent to which metaphysics really is continuous with the natural sciences, see Ladyman and Ross 2007; Chalmers, Manley and Wasserman 2009; Dorr 2010.

might object that the notion of explanation presupposed by (AEI) – that is, *causal* explanation – is needlessly narrow.<sup>21</sup> To offer a single example, suppose one thinks, along with Timothy Williamson (2000), that knowledge is explanatorily basic. Then, if our philosophical judgments are instances of knowledge, any putative explanation of them that does not explain why they are true will *a fortiori* fail to be an adequate explanation. Thus a purely psychological explanation might constitute an adequate explanation of why the brain-in-a-vat believes he has hands, but will not constitute an adequate explanation of why I, as an unenvatted creature, believe I have hands. Similarly, if our philosophical judgments are false, then an adequate explanation of them will naturally not mention their truth; but if our philosophical judgments are items of *knowledge*, then an adequate explanation of them must. Even without supposing a causal relationship between the contents of our philosophical judgments and those judgments, some might take themselves to have reason to deny (7).

I don't mean to be taking a view on which domains of philosophical judgment are causal or whether it's ever correct to explain our philosophical judgments in non-causal terms. Rather, my point is simply this. Whether (AEI) is sound turns on contentious issues in epistemology as well as metaphysics: which properties are causal, what constitutes a good explanation, which things are explanatorily basic. If our philosophical judgments about these questions can be explained without mentioning their truth – as presumably the genealogical sceptic would think they can, on pain of inconsistency – then it seems that (AEI) implies that we wouldn't be justified in accepting a crucial premise of (AEI).<sup>22</sup>

### 2.3 Coincidence

A third argument for genealogical scepticism appeals to the supposed difficulty of providing an explanation of how our philosophical judgments, given their particular genealogy, reliably track the truth. Though related, this argument is

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<sup>21</sup> On the limitations of narrowly causal notions of explanation, see Nerlich 1979; Sober 1983; Woodward 2003, 220–22; Lipton 2004, 9–10.

<sup>22</sup> For similar arguments against explanatory inertness scepticism, cf. Pust 2001 and Cuneo 2007.

distinct from the one discussed in the §2.2. There the argument presupposed that we could explain our philosophical judgments without mention of their truth. The present argument instead relies on the distinct premise that there is no plausible explanation of how our philosophical judgments reliably get onto the truth: that the putative correlation between our philosophical judgments and the philosophical truths is a mere coincidence. One might deny the former while accepting the latter. For one might think that proximate explanations of particular philosophical judgments must include reference to the philosophical facts, but meanwhile deny that there exists a general explanation for how my philosophical judgments reliably track the truth.<sup>23</sup>

Coincidence arguments are popular among genealogical sceptics. For example, Ladyman and Ross claim that we have no reason to think that our metaphysical judgments are reliable given that “proficiency in inferring the large-scale and small-scale structure of our immediate environment, or any features of parts of the universe distant from our ancestral stomping grounds, was of no relevance to our ancestors’ reproductive fitness” (2007, 2). Similarly, Sharon Street argues that since metanormative realism would require us to accept that our normative judgments coincidentally track the mind-independent normative truths, it must be rejected (2006). And Hartry Field offers a similar argument against a realist construal of mathematical knowledge (1989, 2005). Here’s a generalisation of the argument:

#### Argument from Coincidence (AC)

- (10) There is no plausible explanation of how our philosophical judgments reliably track the truth
- (11) If there is no plausible explanation of how judgments in a domain track the truth in that domain, then those judgments are unjustified

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<sup>23</sup> Only someone who endorsed a non-causal view of the relevant domain of philosophical judgment would be likely to say this. For someone with a causal view will presumably claim both that individual judgments are best explained with reference to their truth and that the reliability of judgments in the domain as a whole can be explained causally.

(12) Our philosophical judgments are unjustified

This argument can be interpreted depending on how the ambiguity in ‘our’ philosophical judgments is resolved. When the philosophical judgments under attack are those shared by humans in general – our broad-brush epistemic, moral or metaphysical judgments – then the motivation for (10) will be that, *in light of the evolutionary origins of our philosophical judgments*, there is no plausible explanation of how they reliably track the truth. When the philosophical judgments under attack are those shared by a particular group – e.g. analytic philosophers, or Westerners – then the motivation for (10) will be that, *in light of the group-specific origins of our philosophical judgments*, there is no plausible explanation of how they reliably track the truth.

Again, those who think that philosophical judgments are caused by the philosophical truths won’t have much truck with (10). But what about everyone else? Must they accept that there is no plausible explanation for how philosophical judgments reliably track the truth, in light of their evolutionarily or culturally contingent origins? Suppose that the movement of a certain commodities market in the Netherlands is isomorphic to the daily rainfall in the Amazon basin. What might explain the coordination? One possible explanation is causal: the exchange of the commodity affects the rainfall in the Amazon, or the Amazonian rainfall affects the exchange of the commodity, or there exists some third factor that causally influences both. Here is an alternative explanation, one that doesn’t posit a causal connection underlying the correlation: both Amazonian rainfall and the Dutch commodity market are characterised by the same underlying mathematical structure. Thus their movements evince a striking isomorphism. Now consider a similar argument for the reliability of humanity’s moral judgments: the moral truths are generally oriented around the principle of achieving social harmony, and evolution selected for creatures who had moral beliefs that were conducive to social harmony. Or one for the reliability of our epistemological judgments: the epistemological truths are generally oriented around truth-conduciveness, and evolution selected

for creatures who are good at pursuing truth. Or one for the reliability of our mathematical and metaphysical judgments: the mathematical and metaphysical truths structure the way the world is, and evolution selected for creatures who were good at learning about the way the world is.

Analogous defences could be put forward against (AC) interpreted as an attack on the judgments of some subset of the human population. Let's suppose (AC) is run as an argument against the philosophical judgments of Westerners: given the cultural contingency of philosophical judgments, there is no plausible explanation for how Western philosophical judgments reliably track the truth while those of Easterners don't. But now suppose we respond: the moral truths are generally oriented around human harmony, the epistemological truths around truth-conduciveness, and so on....and Westerners have moral beliefs that are generally oriented around human harmony, epistemological beliefs that are oriented around truth-conduciveness, and so on. Thus the correlation is explained.

The genealogical sceptic might respond that, apart from being culturally chauvinistic, this response simply passes the explanatory buck. For what is now to be explained is the coincidence that the philosophical truths *are* such that they coincide with, say, what happens to be favoured by human evolution or Western culture. Take again the case of the Dutch commodity market and the Amazonian rainfall. The sceptic might ask: what explains the (putative) fact that these two phenomena share the same mathematical structure? Isn't that a coincidence? The anti-sceptic might respond: indeed it is, but there is in general no prohibition against believing in coincidences. Explanation, after all, must come to an end somewhere.

Indeed, if the provision of explanation must eventually give out, then why might not someone reasonably deny premise (11) of (AC)? Why not simply admit that the correlation between our philosophical judgments and the philosophical truths is *brute* – a 'massive coincidence', if you like, but one no more remarkable



than the ‘massive coincidence’ that we’re not brains-in-vats? In some sense it’s just a matter of good luck – or at least the absence of rotten luck – that we live in a corner of possibility space where humans aren’t routinely envatted. And since this contingent unenvatted-ness allows us to know that we have hands, in a sense it’s just a matter of good luck – a happy coincidence – that we are able to know much at all. Why think that the cases that trouble the genealogical sceptic – the good luck of having evolutionary or cultural genealogies that are knowledge-conducive – are any different?

No doubt the proponent of (AC) is uncomfortable with the idea that what we might call ‘genealogical luck’ could play such a central role in our capacity to know philosophical truths. But the extent to which luck influences our ability to know is itself a philosophical question, one on which there is little epistemological consensus.<sup>24</sup> Thus (AC) turns on a set of questions about explanation, coincidence and luck on which epistemologists to systematically disagree, presumably because of various genealogical quirks. So (AC) is threatened with self-defeat. For if there exists no plausible explanation for how our philosophical judgments reliably get onto the truth, then this will presumably apply to our epistemological judgments as well, thus undermining commitment to (AC)’s own premises.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.4 Evidential Improbability

A fourth sceptical strategy is to argue as follows: given the relevant genealogical evidence, it is improbable that our philosophical judgments are true. This argument again relies on the supposition that our philosophical judgments are not caused by the philosophical truths – a supposition rejected, as I already

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of how epistemologists diverge in their thinking about the role that luck plays in the acquisition of knowledge, see Zagzebski 1996 and Srinivasan 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Street (2006, n. 57) raises the worry that her debunking argument against moral realism is self-defeating. Her defence seems to be that, given her metanormative anti-realism, we have reason to accept her argument because we will in fact share the same or sufficiently similar epistemological judgments about its soundness. Thus perhaps Street’s argument is best read as an *ad hominem* attack against those who are antecedently committed to the epistemological premises of her argument. I discuss how we should address the *ad hominem* possibility in §3.

mentioned, by some philosophers for some domains of philosophical judgment. But let's suppose that our philosophical judgments are indeed not caused by the philosophical truths. Instead, let us suppose that they are entirely caused by some relevant genealogy. Take some philosophical judgment of mine – for example, that Gettier's Jones doesn't know. Let's suppose that I believe this because it was adaptive for my evolutionary ancestors to believe this, or because I was taught it by my culture, or in my philosophy class. How probable is it that this judgment is true, given that, wherever my belief came from, it has no causal relationship to the (putative) fact that Jones doesn't know? It seems that the odds are no better than 50-50. When I then generalise the question to a whole domain of judgments – say, all my epistemological judgments – the chance gets very small indeed. Thus the probability that all or even most of my philosophical judgments are true is vanishingly low. Here is a generalisation of the argument:

Argument from Probability on the Evidence (APE)

(13) Conditional on the relevant genealogical evidence, it's no more than 50% probable that any given one of one's philosophical judgments is true

(14) If it's no more than 50% probable that one of one's judgment is true conditional on the relevant genealogical evidence, then that judgment is unjustified

(15) One's philosophical judgments are unjustified

As noted, those who are committed to a causal connection obtaining between a given domain of philosophical judgment and truths in that domain will want to take issue with (13). But those not so committed might dig their heels in at (14). Suppose for instance that I *know* – as indeed I take myself to – that Gettier's Jones doesn't know. And let us suppose, as some epistemologists think, that everything I know is my evidence.<sup>26</sup> Then, how probable is it that my judgment is true, given all of my available evidence? Probability 1. The fact that, conditional only on the *genealogical* evidence, my judgment is no more than 50%

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<sup>26</sup> For an argument for this identity, see Williamson 2000, sec. 9.7.

likely to be true is irrelevant. Compare the following situation. Suppose that I know that Mary tells the truth exactly half the time. She tells me that Liz is in Hawaii. Conditional only on the fact that Mary told me so, that Liz is in Hawaii is 50% likely to be true. But conditional on my total evidence – which includes the fact that I just saw Liz in Oxford – the probability of Liz’s being in Hawaii is rather lower. When genealogical evidence isn’t our only evidence, the conditional probability of a particular belief’s being true on the genealogical evidence does not itself settle whether I should continue to hold onto that belief.

Of course, describing the evidential situation this way is to beg the question against the proponent of (APE). For the sceptic will naturally deny that it *is* part of my evidence that Jones doesn’t know. My only evidence, he will say, is that it *seems* to me that Jones doesn’t know, in conjunction with the genealogical fact that my judgment isn’t caused by its truth. There is a substantive epistemological question here about what constitutes evidence – one that I don’t intend to resolve. But let me briefly draw out two implications. The first is that the genealogical sceptic, insofar as his scepticism is based in his acceptance of (APE), seems to share something in common with the global sceptic. As Williamson (2004, 2000, 2007) points out, global sceptics typically operate by narrowing the range of dialectically permissible evidence. Normally I take my total evidence to include facts about the external world. For example, I see Liz in the library, and use that as evidence to infer that she’s not in Hawaii, that she’s working on her dissertation, that she might fancy a drink later, and so on. But the sceptic narrows my evidence, granting only that it *seems* to me that Liz is in the library: how do I know that I am not hallucinating, or a recently envatted brain? He then challenges me to reason outward from my inner mental state of *seeming* to see Liz, to the (putative) external fact that Liz is indeed in the library.

We might say something similar about the dialectical situation involving the proponent of (APE). Normally, I include in my total evidence the fact that Jones doesn’t know, using this for example as evidence that justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge is false. But the proponent of (APE) insists that my only

evidence is that it *seems* to me that Jones doesn't know. I am then challenged to reason outward from my mental state of judging that Jones doesn't know to the (putative) fact that Jones doesn't know. Once our philosophical evidence is psychologised – transformed from the propositional content of our judgments to the bare fact that we have these particular judgments – we are in a quandary, for there is no clear route from the psychological fact to the philosophical fact.

Since genealogical sceptics are not global sceptics, we might think they carry the burden of explaining why their psychologisation of the evidence is different from the psychologisation of evidence employed by the traditional external world sceptic. For example, Joshua Alexander (2012, 104ff.) claims that for a philosopher to justifiably use her Gettier judgment as evidence, she must be able first to persuade an interlocutor who doesn't share that judgment of its truth. But a similar demand could be made for any premise whatsoever; if everything has to be defended to the satisfaction of the sceptic, then it will turn out that nothing is defensible. Why should we not include the contents of our philosophical judgments as evidence, but are permitted to include the putative facts that our judgments are such-and-such and have such-and-such genealogies? In other words, why should we let the genealogical sceptic set the appropriate standard of evidence, but not the global sceptic?

Anti-sceptical epistemologists like Williamson will not, consistently with their antecedent views, be sympathetic to (APE) due to its resemblance to the global sceptical argument. But to insist that (APE) is sound – and, in particular, that (14) is true – is to insist on a philosophical judgment that itself seems *prima facie* susceptible to (APE). Conditional on the genealogical evidence, the probability that the sceptic's judgment that (14) is true is itself true seems no better than 50%. Thus (14) seems to imply that we would be unjustified in believing it.

### 3.5 Unreliability

I have saved what I take to be the most epistemologically promising argument for genealogical scepticism for last. The argument deploys the widely-accepted *safety* condition on knowledge, according to which S knows  $p$  only if S could not have easily falsely believed  $p$  using a sufficiently similar method to the one she actually uses to form her belief that  $p$  (Sosa 1999). More simply, one's belief must be based on a *reliable* method, one that does not produce nearby false beliefs. Unlike the sensitivity condition, the safety condition does not swiftly generate the result that we know nothing at all. My belief that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat is insensitive: if I *were* a brain-in-a-vat, I would still believe that I wasn't. But my belief that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat is – on the assumption that I'm in fact embodied, and that there's no nearby threat of being envatted – safe. So safety has the benefit of capturing the intuitive importance of reliable truth-tracking for knowledge but, because that demand is confined to an agent's modal neighbourhood, does not generate sceptical worries.

Safety is generally considered an *externalist* condition on justification. According to epistemic *internalism*, justification supervenes entirely on states that are suitably 'internal' to agents. How this notion of 'internal' is unpacked generates two varieties of internalism. According to 'access' internalism, justification supervenes solely on states to which agents have privileged first-personal access, i.e. some subset of the conscious mental states (Chisholm 1977; BonJour 1985). According to 'mental state' internalism, justification supervenes solely on a certain cluster of non-factive mental states, whether or not agents enjoy privileged access to those states (Conee and Feldman 2001; cf. Wedgwood 2002). Externalism is the denial of the claim that justification supervenes entirely on non-factive mental states. Safety is an externalist condition on justification because the modal profile of one's belief is not itself a mental state.

But safety considerations can be deployed by internalists too. Most internalists will agree that strong evidence that one's belief is unsafe defeats the justification of one's belief. That is, even if one's belief was previously (internalistically) justified, acquiring evidence that it is unsafe renders it (internalistically)

unjustified. Suppose Charlotte sees a red book on the laboratory table and forms the true belief that there is a red book on the table. Then her chemistry teacher – whom Charlotte has every reason to believe is trustworthy and reliable – informs her that there is a red light shining on the table, a light that makes non-red objects appear red. This constitutes evidence that Charlotte’s belief is unsafe; Charlotte now has reason to believe that her visual inspection of the book on the table could have easily led her to have a false belief. Internalists will want to say that, so long as Charlotte has no reason to mistrust her teacher, and has no reasons independent of her visual inspection for believing that there is a red book on the table, her belief is rendered unjustified by the new evidence she has acquired. So while internalists won’t endorse a safety condition on knowledge, they will most likely endorse what we might call an *internalist safety* condition, according to which strong evidence of unsafety defeats justification.

What will an externalist want to say about this sort of case? Suppose the teacher’s testimony is truthful: there really is a red light shining on the table. Then it is the case that Charlotte’s belief is unsafe, and according to the externalist, unjustified. Importantly, this was true *before* Charlotte received the teacher’s testimony. The receipt of the testimony simply allows Charlotte to come to know that her belief is, and indeed has always been, unjustified. Now suppose that there is in fact no red light, and thus that the teacher’s testimony is misleading. What will the externalist say about this? Here things are trickier. First, we can distinguish between those externalists who do and do not countenance the possibility of *defeat*, the loss of justification through the mere acquisition of new evidence.<sup>27</sup> Defeatist externalists will say that, although the teacher’s testimony is misleading, it nonetheless destroys Charlotte’s justification (Goldman 1986, 62-3, 111-2; Alston 1988b, 238-9; Nozick 1981, 196). Thus the defeatist externalist gives the same verdict as our internalist.

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<sup>27</sup> I say ‘mere’ to distinguish genuine defeat cases from cases in which an agent loses justification because the acquisition of new evidence results in the agent’s ceasing to believe or changing the basis of her belief.

But what of those externalists who reject defeat? Here we can further distinguish between *dogmatic* anti-defeatists and *akratic* anti-defeatists. Dogmatic anti-defeatists think that one can retain the epistemic status of one's belief – as justified, rational or knowledge – so long as one dismisses the misleading evidence. Thus dogmatists will say that Charlotte can dismiss her teacher's misleading testimony, thereby retaining her justified belief that there is a red book on the table.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, akratic anti-defeatists think that in such cases one should not dismiss the misleading evidence; if one believes anything about one's first-order belief, one should believe that it lacks the relevant epistemic status. But compatible with that, according to the akratic anti-defeatist, is maintaining a justified (or rational or knowledgable) first-order belief. Thus Charlotte can justifiably believe that there is a red book on the table, while also justifiably believing that *that* belief is unjustified.

The safety-based argument I'm going to formulate on behalf of the genealogical sceptic will aim to be acceptable to both internalists and defeat-friendly externalists. I'll return to the discussion of anti-defeatists – of both the dogmatic and akratic variety – later. But first, one more preliminary. The propositions under discussion in this paper – namely, philosophical propositions – are plausibly *necessary*; if Gettier's Jones doesn't know, it is *necessarily* the case that he doesn't know. Beliefs about necessary propositions will trivially satisfy Sosa's safety condition.<sup>29</sup> But a related condition can be constructed for beliefs about necessary propositions:

SAFETY<sub>n</sub>: S's belief in the necessary proposition *p* is safe<sub>n</sub> iff S could not have easily believed not-*p* using a sufficiently similar method she uses to believe *p*.

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<sup>28</sup> Some dogmatists, for example Plantinga and Thomas Nagel, think that only certain kinds of judgments are immune from defeat. I discuss this in more detail shortly.

<sup>29</sup> A similar problem arises for appeal to sensitivity conditions in sceptical arguments against philosophical judgment. See n. 13.

Suppose I am very poor at math. I want to know the sum of 236 and 582. After struggling to add the sums in my head, I take a guess and come to believe it's 818. I now believe a necessary truth. My belief is thus trivially safe, since there are no nearby (or indeed any) worlds in which 236 plus 582 doesn't equal 818. But my belief is not safe<sub>n</sub>. For the method I used to arrive at my true belief – wild guessing – easily leads me to believe that the sum of 236 and 582 is *not* 818. I'll use this notion to construct a final argument for genealogical scepticism:

### Argument from Unreliability (AU)

- (16) The genealogy of our philosophical judgments constitutes strong, undefeated evidence that those judgments are unsafe<sub>n</sub>
- (17) Whenever we have strong, undefeated evidence that one of our judgments is unsafe<sub>n</sub>, we ought to abandon it
- (18) We ought to abandon our philosophical judgments

Again, this argument can be unpacked depending on what sort of specific genealogical debunking claim is at issue. With experimental debunking, 'our' refers to the philosophical judgments shared by some group. So the experimental philosopher can argue that his data – that philosophical judgments systematically vary with culture, gender, socioeconomic status, philosophical training and so on – gives you (say, a rich white male professional philosopher) decisive reason to believe that your philosophical judgments are unsafe<sub>n</sub>. This is because the experimental data suggest that, using the method you actually use to arrive at your philosophical judgments, you could have easily believed the opposite of those judgments – if you were poor, non-white, female or philosophically untrained. Since the experimental data give you decisive reason to believe that your philosophical judgments are unreliable, you ought to abandon those judgments.

The evolutionary debunking version of (AU) will run similarly. The evolutionary data provides us with strong, undefeated evidence that our philosophical judgments are unsafe<sub>n</sub>. Why? Because our evolutionary history



could have easily gone differently, and had it done so, our method of philosophical judgment would have given rise to contrary philosophical judgments. If it's true that we could have easily had opposing moral or other philosophical judgments, then it seems that the method we use to arrive at our actual philosophical judgments – roughly, the method of believing in accordance with our evolutionarily-selected dispositions to judge – could easily lead us into falsity. Recognising this, the evolutionary debunker might argue, we should abandon our philosophical judgments.<sup>30</sup>

A version of (AU) can also be deployed to support the conciliatory verdict on the question of peer disagreement – roughly, the verdict that disagreement with an epistemic peer defeats one's justification (Feldman 2006; Elga 2007; Christensen 2007a, 2010, 2011). Suppose you and your best friend Hussein always go to lunch and split the bill. You have equally reliable track records when it comes to doing the mental math required to figure out how much you each owe. On this occasion, you believe that you each owe  $x$  dollars and Hussein believes that you each owe  $x+1$  dollars. Many think that, in such a case, you ought to abandon your belief that you each owe  $x$  dollars, and only re-instate it after you have double-checked or achieved some independent confirmation that you were right.<sup>31</sup> (AU) gives us a promising way of vindicating this thought. For we might think that the fact that Hussein disagrees with you constitutes strong undefeated evidence that your judgment (that you each owe  $x$  dollars) is unreliable. For Hussein's disagreement suggests that you could have easily, using the method of mental math, arrived at the belief that you each owe not- $x$ . In the face of this decisive reason to believe your judgment is unsafe<sub>n</sub>, you ought to (at least temporarily) abandon it.

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<sup>30</sup> It's worth noting that there is nothing about (AU) that requires *systematic* variation in philosophical judgments. Suppose that there was simply random disagreement about philosophical questions that did not track any other (cultural, gender, training, and so on) vectors. This would plausibly still constitute *prima facie* evidence of the unreliability of these judgments. This is something of a puzzle. On one hand, the safety-theoretic version of the argument for genealogical scepticism is (I think) most epistemologically compelling. On the other, it does not essentially involve one of the intuitively most troubling features of genealogical contingency: namely, its systematicity.

<sup>31</sup> This case I borrow from Christensen 2011.

Before discussing how the defender of philosophical judgment might respond to (AU), I want to point out that the present argument signals a shift in the flow of discussion. My suspicion is that what people find intuitively compelling about genealogical scepticism doesn't have much to do with considerations of safety. Instead I suspect that when considering evolutionary or experimental debunking arguments, people are struck by the (putative) revelation that what is 'really doing the work' behind our beliefs are forces orthogonal to the truth of those beliefs – forces of evolution, culture and so on. This then sends one into sceptical free-fall: *If our beliefs have nothing to do with the truth, how can we trust them?* This thought can be cashed out in various ways: in terms of explanatory inertness, or coincidence, or probabilities. But one dialectical weakness these arguments share, as I have tried to bring out, is the presupposition that there is no causal connection between our philosophical judgments and the philosophical truths – an assumption denied by some philosophers for many domains of philosophical judgment. By contrast, (AU) doesn't suppose that no causal connection exists between our philosophical judgments and the philosophical truths. Rather, it suggests, more weakly, that even if there is some sort of causal connection between the philosophical truths and our philosophical judgments, that connection is insufficiently reliable to produce knowledge. In a sense it's a less thrilling point to make; it doesn't inspire the same sort of sceptical vertigo as the earlier arguments. But this, I submit, is a feature rather than a bug. Defending our philosophical judgments against (AU) is a subtler and more interesting business. I'll now turn to how that might be done.

Recall our branching taxonomy of epistemologists. First we have the distinction between internalists and externalists. Within externalists we have defeatists and anti-defeatists. And finally we have both dogmatic and akratic anti-defeatists. So we have four kinds of epistemologists to consider: internalists, defeatist externalists, dogmatic anti-defeatist externalists and akratic anti-defeatist externalists. I'm going to discuss how each kind of epistemologist might respond

to (AU) in turn. Because they handle misleading higher-order evidence in the same way, I'll group together internalists and defeatist externalists.

### 2.5.1. Internalists and defeatist externalists

Premise (16) of (AU) says that the genealogy of our philosophical judgments constitutes strong undefeated evidence that those judgments are unsafe<sub>n</sub>. If that's true, then internalists and defeatist externalists alike will conclude that we ought to abandon those judgments.<sup>32</sup> But why think (16) true? Why think that the relevant genealogical evidence *is* evidence that our philosophical judgments are unsafe<sub>n</sub>?

Take the putative variation in Gettier judgments with extent of philosophical training. To simplify matters, suppose that those with philosophical training share the judgment that Jones doesn't know, and that those without philosophical training judge that Jones does know. The proponent of (AU) thinks that this constitutes evidence that our (that is, we philosophers') Gettier judgments are unsafe<sub>n</sub>. But this is only true if the methods used by philosophers and non-philosophers to arrive at their respective Gettier judgments are indeed 'sufficiently similar'. One might think instead that two quite dissimilar methods are in play here – the expert method employed by philosophers, say, and the lay method used by the philosophically untrained (Bealer 1998; Devitt 2006, 2011; Kauppinen 2007; Sosa 2007; Williamson 2007, 191-2; Liao 2008; Pinillos et al. 2011).<sup>33</sup> Similar things could be said in response to other instances of (AU). For example, one might think that the method we humans use to arrive at our moral

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<sup>32</sup> This is an oversimplification. Wedgwood for example is an internalist who endorses akrasia about (both deductive and non-deductive) inference (2011). That is, he thinks that certain beliefs formed on the basis of competent inference, unlike perceptual beliefs, are not susceptible to defeat. Thus Wedgwood will think that at least some of our 'philosophical judgments', if the result of competent inference, will be immune from defeat. For the sake of simplicity I am going to bracket this sort of internalist view.

<sup>33</sup> Alvin Plantinga (1995) gives a similar response to genealogical attacks on the rationality of religious exclusivism. He argues that it might be the case that the Christian is using a superior method in arriving at her Christian belief, and that the non-Christian "has *made a mistake*, or *has a blind spot*, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate" (205).

judgments is rather dissimilar from the method that would be used by creatures who developed a radically different morality thanks to a different evolutionary history. Our method, we might say, is one that is sensitive to genuine moral reasons, while the method used by these other creatures lacks such sensitivity. And so on. If so, then (16) is false: the genealogical evidence is *not* evidence that our philosophical judgments are unreliable.

Whenever we speak of methods of belief-formation in accounts of epistemic reliability we come up against what is known as the *generality problem* for reliabilism (Goldman 1979; Conee and Feldman 1998). How are we to type the relevant methods when evaluating the safety of a given belief? In general, a very coarse-grained typing of ‘sufficiently similar method’ will give us the absurd conclusion that practically no belief is reliable, while a maximally fine-grained typing will give us the equally absurd conclusion that every belief is reliable.<sup>34</sup> Whether or not the generality problem is a fundamental problem for safety (and other reliabilist) accounts of knowledge, it does pose a dialectical challenge here. For the steadfast philosopher will take her philosophical judgments to constitute knowledge, and will on that basis judge that the methods in question are sufficiently dissimilar not to undermine that knowledge. Meanwhile the sceptic will deny that these philosophical judgments do constitute knowledge, and so will insist that the relevant methods are to be typed more coarsely. The generality problem means that there is no dialectically neutral way of settling this question. So again, the sceptic and defender of philosophical judgment will find themselves begging the question against each other.

### 2.5.2. Dogmatic anti-defeatism

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<sup>34</sup> A similar problem arises for the question of which worlds count as ‘nearby’ in modal conditions such as safety and safety<sub>n</sub>. This would be an alternative way for defenders of philosophical judgment to go, i.e. arguing that the worlds in which they would have mistaken philosophical judgments are *too far away* to undermine the reliability of their actual judgments. I myself find this kind of defence more plausible against evolutionary debunking arguments than experimental debunking arguments, though see White (2010) for a defence of the latter.

According to Thomas Nagel, certain beliefs – well-formed beliefs about moral, logical and mathematical truths – are simply immune from defeat (1996). He thus rejects (17): at least some of our genealogically contingent philosophical judgments are thus unscathed by (AU). Plantinga meanwhile argues that certain judgments – ones that are ‘properly basic’ – are what he calls “intrinsic defeaters” (1986, 311), meaning that their contents defeat any potential defeaters. Thus, assuming that our philosophical judgments are properly basic,<sup>35</sup> Plantinga will reject (16): the genealogical evidence does not constitute *undefeated* evidence that our philosophical judgments are unreliable. Maria Aarnio-Lasonen (2010) puts forward a more general anti-defeat case, arguing that we can always retain knowledgable belief by acting dogmatically in the face of misleading evidence.<sup>36,37</sup>

For the sake of simplicity I’m going to focus on Plantinga’s form of dogmatic anti-defeatism. Suppose that I’m confronted with evidence that my judgments about Gettier cases are unreliable, for it turns out that those judgments are culturally contingent. According to Plantinga, if my Gettier judgments are in fact properly formed – and thus the genealogical evidence misleading – then I can use the contents of those very judgments to dismiss the misleading evidence. Thus I can reason as follows: *The genealogical evidence suggests that my Gettier judgments are unreliable. But in Gettier cases the subjects don’t know. So my Gettier judgments are reliable, and the genealogical evidence is misleading.*

The sceptic will protest that this is a form of *bootstrapping*, using a method to confirm its own reliability without any independent confirmation. Thus Robert Cummins complains that

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<sup>35</sup> Plantinga believes that many of our philosophical judgments are properly basic – for example, our moral judgments.

<sup>36</sup> Though in her (2014), Aarnio-Lasonen seems more sympathetic to an akratic form of anti-defeatism.

<sup>37</sup> It’s important to note that while Aarnio-Lasonen thinks it is possible to retain knowledge in the face of misleading evidence, she thinks that doing so is often *unreasonable* and thus epistemically criticisable. So it’s not clear how much comfort her view offers to the philosopher who wishes to hold onto her philosophical judgments in the face of (possibly misleading) genealogical evidence.

we have no access to the workings of intuition that is *independent* of intuition itself; thus, intuition cannot be calibrated against errors in the way that a scientific device can (1998, 116-7, italics added).

Jonathan Weinberg makes a similar point in his discussion of philosophical expertise:

Trained expert judgments, for example, like those of chess grand masters or medical diagnosticians, lie outside the range of my critique; so too do our judgments in most ordinary cases that some particular object or event falls under a particular concept. I am not attacking such intuitions as those not because they are immune to worries about hopefulness, but because by and large they are in fact hopeful. Both expert judgments and ordinary categorizations usually possess a great deal of *external corroboration* and internal coherence (2007, 334-5, italics added).

Weinberg's implication is that, unlike the doctor or chess master, the philosopher lacks recourse to suitably *independent* corroboration of the reliability of her judgments. Of course much hangs on what we consider an 'independent' means of corroboration. When I use my sensory apparatus – say, in scientific experimentation – to confirm the reliability of the human sensory apparatus, am I thereby illicitly bootstrapping my way into 'easy knowledge'? Presumably not. Compare the case of my Gettier judgment. When I consider the Gettier case, I find myself strongly disposed to judge that Jones doesn't know. Suppose, after forming my Gettier judgment, I then think abstractly about the nature of knowledge, and conclude that it is incompatible with certain forms of luck. Then I return to the Gettier case and realise that it involves a certain form of luck. Might this serve as independent corroboration of my initial judgment?

For the sake of argument let's grant the sceptic that there is no suitably 'independent' means of corroborating the reliability of our philosophical judgments. If they are to be corroborated at all, it will be through a form of bootstrapping. Is this worrying? Whether bootstrapping is illicit or not is yet another matter of epistemological controversy. Jonathan Vogel (2000), Stewart Cohen (2002) and Roger White (2006) agree that bootstrapping – and the 'easy knowledge' it produces – are epistemically unkosher. Meanwhile Plantinga (1995) defends the use of bootstrapping in cases of religious and moral disagreement, and James van Cleve (2003) argues that if bootstrapping is illicit, the only alternative is scepticism. Without getting into the details of the relevant arguments, I'll just offer one sort of case that puts pressure on the view that bootstrapping is always epistemically illicit:

SURPRISE HOMOPHOBE: You have known your friend Robert for a few years now, and you believe his judgment to be as good as yours. For you agree on most things, and when you occasionally don't, one is always able to change the mind of the other through reasoned conversation. One day you're shocked to discover that Robert thinks that homosexuality is immoral. You discuss this for some time and realise your disagreement is bedrock. Robert simply has the strong, intuitive judgment that homosexuality is immoral. But on all other issues you continue to agree.

What should your response be? Should you conclude that your judgment about homosexuality is unreliable, and therefore that you should abandon it? Plausibly not. Plausibly, you should conclude that Robert's judgment on this question is impaired, perhaps because he has grown up in a bigoted home or is suffering from repression and self-hatred. Crucially, the only reason you have for concluding that Robert's judgment is impaired – and thus that the disagreement is misleading evidence of your own unreliability – is the fact that homosexuality is *not* immoral. If bootstrapping is acceptable in some cases, we should ask to know why it is not acceptable in others. The (AU)-sceptic cannot simply assume

the illegitimacy of bootstrapping, or the falsity of dogmatic anti-defeatism – or at least, as I will argue shortly, not without risking self-defeat.

### 2.5.3 Akratic anti-defeatism

A final response to (AU) comes from the akratic anti-defeatist. Unlike the internalist, defeatist externalist or dogmatic anti-defeatist, the akratic anti-defeatist denies (17). That is, she thinks that it can be rationally permissible at the same time to (a) believe  $p$ , and (b) believe that one's belief that  $p$  is unjustified.<sup>38</sup> While many epistemologists assume or argue for the falsity of the akratic position (Feldman 2005; Kolodny 2005; Christensen 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2011; Elga 2007; Smithies 2012; Greco (2014); Horowitz (2014); Titelbaum 2015), there is a growing pro-akrasia contingent. For example, Allen Coates (2012) and Brian Weatherson (m.s.) offer general arguments for the akratic conclusion that, in cases of misleading higher-order evidence, one can justifiably believe  $p$  and justifiably believe that one's belief that  $p$  is unjustified. In such cases, Weatherson claims, "each conjunct is well-supported by the evidence" (ibid., 15) and thus rationally permissible to believe. And Coates claims that when higher-order evidence is misleading "we can rationally judge that our belief is irrational even though it is in fact rational, and so we can rationally be akratic" (2012, 122). Williamson (2011) argues that a long competent deduction is a case in which epistemic akrasia is rational, since even if one has achieved knowledge through the deduction, one is still in a position to justifiably believe that one has made a mistake in one's reasoning somewhere. Similarly, Wedgwood argues that a competent inference produces knowledge even when an agent rationally believes that it hasn't, or rationally doubts that it has.<sup>39</sup> Williamson (2011) further argues that even when our perceptual evidence is strong enough to allow us to know, that evidence often makes it improbable that

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<sup>38</sup> Or if we're speaking in terms of credences rather than outright belief, to maintain the same high credence in  $p$  whilst having also having a high credence in the proposition that one's high credence in  $p$  is rationally impermissible.

<sup>39</sup> Wedgwood is an internalist who accepts the possibility of defeat for perceptual knowledge; he thinks that certain cases of competent inferences are special and thus license akratic treatment (see n. 32).



we *do* know. This is because we are not always, according to Williamson, in a position to know what our evidence is; thus our evidence can be massively misleading about the quality of our epistemic situation. To deny the rational permissibility of epistemic akrasia is, he argues, tantamount to scepticism about perceptual knowledge.

One might hope to extend a broadly pro-akrasia view to genealogical evidence about philosophical judgment.<sup>40</sup> Thus one might think that we are justified in believing, in light of the genealogical evidence, that our philosophical judgments are unjustified – but nonetheless think that, so long as those judgments *are* justified, we are permitted to maintain them. No doubt there is something uncomfortable about asserting and theorising on the basis of judgments one takes oneself probably not to know. (Though Richard Rorty's figure of the liberal ironist (1989) might be thought of as the sort of person who is constitutively capable of embracing just this sort of discomfort.)<sup>41</sup> And it's an interesting question whether, as a psychological matter, one could really go on philosophising in this way. But for those who think that epistemic akrasia is sometimes rational, this might be a final way of resisting the pull of (AU)-scepticism.

Let me leave aside these thorny epistemological questions. My basic point, by now surely annoyingly familiar, is this. Whether (AU) is sound turns on various complex issues in epistemology: about method individuation, dogmatism, bootstrapping, akrasia and defeat. People's judgments about (16) and (17)

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<sup>40</sup> Whether one can extend the particular arguments marshalled in favour of epistemic akrasia by Coates, Weatherston, Wedgwood and Williamson will turn on various questions about how we should think of what is going on in the formation of philosophical judgment – whether, for example, all philosophical judgments should be classified under Wedgwood's heading of indefeasible inference, or whether philosophical judgments should be thought of as evidentially-based (Coates and Weatherston). Note that Williamson's 'improbable knowing' argument doesn't easily extend to philosophical judgments since it crucially involves contingent truths and the notion of a margin-for-error.

<sup>41</sup> Another option in a similar spirit is to adopt some sort of contextualism about philosophical knowledge or knowledge-claims, where the 'low standards' context is the ordinary philosophical classroom, with a shift to a 'high standards' context happening whenever a naturalistic, genealogical account of philosophical judgments become salient (e.g. when the sociologist or evolutionary debunker walks into the room).

systematically vary; for example, willingness to accept or deny (17) is likely strongly correlated with whether one has studied philosophy at Oxford in the early 21st century. Does this not constitute strong, undefeated evidence that the sceptic's judgment that (16) and (17) are true is itself unsafe<sub>n</sub>?

The sceptic will perhaps protest that his judgments that (16) and (17) are true are not susceptible to (AU). For he might claim that these judgments are the result of an *expert* method. Or the sceptic might argue that while the variation in judgments about (16) and (17) provides *prima facie* evidence that his judgments are unsafe<sub>n</sub>, that evidence is defeated by the truth of (16) and (17). Or finally the sceptic might concede that his judgments are likely unsafe<sub>n</sub>, but continue theorising on the basis of those judgments in the hope that they are – *pace* the genealogical evidence – safe<sub>n</sub>.

The first of these defences is the one most frequently invoked by genealogical sceptics, especially experimental philosophers:

Our claim is neither epistemological nor metaphysical, but methodological (Swain, Alexander and Weinberg 2006, 151).

I have heard the following *tu quoque*: 'Your arguments against appeal to intuition in philosophy are themselves grounded in intuition.' I do not think so; I think they are grounded in psychology and successful scientific practice (Cummins 1998, n. 8, 127).

[S]ome uses of intuition, including those about logic and math, and about epistemic principles whose merits can be partially tested in the laboratory of the history of science, can reasonably be [considered reliable], and we can trust them for establishing premises to use in our arguments—including...my arguments here (Weinberg 2007, 340).

Here the sceptic's thought seems to be: I am justified in believing and asserting the premises of my sceptical argument because they are the result of a *special method* – namely the method of good scientific practice.<sup>42</sup>

The idea that something as various as scientific (or 'ordinary') practice could settle the question of whether (16) and (17) are true strikes me as a bit optimistic. Both (16) and (17) are fine-grained epistemological claims. Both fall out of a picture on which reliability is epistemically important – a rough picture no doubt vindicated by good scientific practice. But it is a bit much to think that a general commitment to the epistemic importance of reliability contains the fine detail that these genealogical sceptics claim it does. Nowhere in the history of science have claims as specific as (16) or (17) been tested. A broad commitment to the epistemic importance of reliability is entirely compatible with the denial of (16), (17) or both. To move from the generalities of 'good scientific practice' to the specifics of (16) and (17) requires epistemological judgment: just the kind of judgment the genealogical sceptic wishes to undermine.

So even with what I take to be the most epistemologically plausible argument for genealogical scepticism – one that sees genealogical revelations as higher-order evidence of unreliability that defeats first-order justification – there is still the

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<sup>42</sup> There is a striking parallel between the current debate and the aforementioned debate about the rationality of religious exclusivism. Plantinga makes a *tu quoque* charge against pluralist sceptics of religious exclusivism:

But, of course, the same goes for the pluralist. Pluralism isn't and hasn't been widely popular in the world at large; if the pluralist had been born in Madagascar, or medieval France, he probably wouldn't have been a pluralist. Does it follow that he shouldn't be a pluralist or that his pluralist beliefs are produced in him by an unreliable belief-producing process? (1995, 212).

The pluralist John Hick's response to is to draw a distinction between religious and philosophical claims, in much the same way that the experimentalist draws a distinction between epistemological and methodological claims:

[Plantinga's] *tu quoque*, that I might well not have advocated religious pluralism if I had been born in many other times or places, and that I affirm it in much the same way that others affirm traditional Christianity, misses the all-important difference that religious pluralism...is not another religious faith or dogma alongside others, but a second-order philosophical theory, or hypothesis, about the relationship between the world religions when these are understood religiously as distinguished from naturalistically (Hick 2001, 57).

threat that the argument will turn out to be self-defeating, impugning our commitment to its own premises.

### 3. In search of stable ground

According to Sextus Empiricus, the sceptic does not put forward an argument in order to convince his interlocutor of its conclusion. Rather his argument is intended to reveal an instability in the interlocutor's own accepted premises; it is the sceptic's interlocutor who, by his own lights, knows nothing, including the premises that might support that very conclusion. The sceptic meanwhile simply suspends judgments on all matters, including his argument's premises and conclusion – and recommends, for the sake of your psychic wellbeing, that you do the same.

Genealogical scepticism should be taken seriously as such an *ad hominem* threat. In other words, it is not enough simply to note that the epistemological principles on which genealogical scepticism must rest plausibly undermine themselves. For we might find ourselves in the unfortunate position of being wedded to the premises of the genealogical sceptic's argument. If so, then it is not the sceptic's argument that is self-defeating, but our own epistemological framework. What we need is stable ground: a positive conception of what knowledge demands, and what we're doing when we do philosophy, such that it does not turn out that, by our own lights, we cannot have philosophical knowledge.

Three options for securing such stable ground present themselves. First, we might adopt an epistemological framework that is resistant to genealogical scepticism – an epistemological framework, as I have already suggested, that is tolerant of the role that luck (specifically, *genealogical* luck) plays in the acquisition of knowledge. I say a bit more about this suggestion in 3.1. In section 3.2 I turn to a second alternative: embracing an anti-realism about the contents of philosophical judgments such that these judgments are resistant to

genealogical defeat. In 3.3 I discuss a third, more radical option: abandoning the idea that our philosophical commitments amount to beliefs at all. What I say below is both brief and exploratory; I don't take myself to be endorsing any of these metaphilosophical views, though I confess some sympathy for all, and apprehension about each.

### 3.1 Luck-friendly epistemology

Epistemologists differ over the extent to which luck plays a role in the acquisition of knowledge. All epistemologists will agree that luck has some role to play. Bad luck can preclude knowledge; the brain-in-a-vat gets to know very little at all – perhaps only how things appear to him – because he has the bad luck of being envatted. And good luck can produce knowledge; if I by chance turn my head at just the right moment, I'll come to know that a sparrow has just landed on the fence. Where epistemologists disagree is on just how much knowledge we can acquire through good luck. Indeed this has been a theme running through this paper. Recall the Argument from Coincidence (§2.2). One response I said the anti-sceptic might give is simply to accept that it is coincidental that our philosophical judgments track the philosophical truths. The sceptic will think this is an insufficient response, demanding some independent confirmation of the putative coincidence. The anti-sceptic will concede that no such independent confirmation is available, but maintain that this doesn't undermine the claim to philosophical knowledge. At issue here is whether the philosopher can know her philosophy judgments simply by being a beneficiary of good genealogical luck – the luck of having judgments that do, as a contingent matter, track the philosophical truths – without having any independent grounds for thinking herself so lucky.

Similarly, consider the Argument from Unsafety (§2.5). One way of responding to that argument, I said, is to insist that the beliefs in question are not the product of sufficiently similar methods. For example one might insist (to take up our contrived case again) that the belief-forming methods of Westerners are not

sufficiently similar to the belief-forming methods of Easterners to undermine the reliability of Western beliefs. To insist on this would be to deny that the internal symmetry of Western and Eastern beliefs undermines Western claims to knowledge. As (let us suppose) a steadfast Westerner I am confident not only of my beliefs but also that my belief-forming method is the superior one, even while knowing that I would feel the same, *mutatis mutandis*, if I were an Easterner. In other words, I am treating the Easterner as my brain-in-a-vat counterpart: unluckily ‘envatted’, as it were, in an Eastern genealogy. Meanwhile, I take myself to be luckily ‘embodied’ in a Western genealogy – and this to be sufficient for knowledge.

Another way of responding to the Argument from Unsafety, I said, is to adopt the akratic strategy of accepting that the relevant genealogical evidence constitutes decisive reason to think that one’s philosophical judgments are probably non-knowledgeable, but to insist nonetheless that they might be knowledgeable, so long as they meet the externalist conditions for knowledge. On such a view, even if one is doing what looks to *oneself* as rationally impermissible, one might still be doing what is rationally permissible. This means that one can, as it were, stumble into rationality or knowledge, even if by one’s own lights one is acting improperly.

In general, a luck-tolerant epistemology – specifically an epistemology that is tolerant of genealogical luck – will be robust against genealogical scepticism. The more one is willing to draw an epistemological asymmetry between people with different genealogies, the more one will be able to protect the knowledge of those with the ‘right’ genealogies. Of course this strategy can lead one to say some ethically unsavoury things, for example that Westerners or trained philosophers have an epistemically superior method of belief-formation than Easterners or lay people. Indeed I think our judgments about the role that luck plays in the acquisition of knowledge are intimately bound up with our moral worldview. In particular they appear to be bound up with the conviction, widespread in modernity, that people are only appropriately judged for those

things that lie within their sphere of control. It seems to us deeply unfair to judge someone negatively for something that befell her as a matter of bad luck, and similarly unfair to judge someone positively for something that happened to her merely as a matter of good luck. A similar instinct can drive a certain sceptical attitude toward knowledge: it would be unfair if some were blocked from acquiring knowledge because of an unfavourable genealogy, and similarly unfair if others were privy to knowledge because of some genealogical fluke. This instinct will be checked by the commonsense recognition that certain contingent things must be in place to allow for knowledge; had I never been taught math, I wouldn't know anything about calculus. But here we perhaps console ourselves with the thought that any intelligent agent, whatever her current beliefs, could be brought around to seeing how the calculus operates. We fear that the same thing cannot be said of morality, religion or philosophy. In these cases, different genealogies produce deep, embedded and structural disagreements. If everyone is going to be equally in a position to acquire knowledge in these domains, then genealogy cannot matter so decisively. Thus the natural push to nihilism, according to which everyone is equally ignorant – or some sort of relativism, according to which everyone equally knows.

On the alternative view I've been laying out (not one I endorse), we must accept that to get it right in philosophy (as elsewhere) requires having the right genealogy, and this is never entirely within agential control. As I've said, such a metaphilosophical view can doubtless sound morally unsavoury. Such moral qualms play a large role in the debate about the rationality of religious exclusivism in the face of religious diversity:<sup>43</sup>

Ethically, Religious Exclusivism has the morally repugnant result of making those who have privileged knowledge, or who are intellectually astute, a religious elite, while penalizing those who happen to have no access to the putatively correct religious view, or

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<sup>43</sup> See fns. 7 and 33.

who are incapable of advanced understanding...(Runzo 1988, 197-343).

...except at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent fellow human beings we believe that we know God and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong (Smith 1976, 14).

There is a striking resemblance here to many of the things said by experimental philosophers. For example, Machery et al. claim that “[i]n the absence of a principled argument about why philosophers’ intuitions are superior, [analytic philosophy of language] smacks of *narcissism in the extreme*” (2004, 9, emphasis added).

In my view, the moralising language apparent in much genealogical scepticism is more than just rhetorical bluster. It signals a genuine discomfort with the idea that getting philosophy right could be a matter of radical genealogical luck – and a genuine discomfort with anyone proclaiming themselves in this way lucky. That a certain moral conviction is in play here is brought out by cases in which this conviction comes into conflict with other deeply held moral beliefs. Recall my case in which you discover your friend Robert to be an entrenched homophobe. My contention was that this case constitutes a plausible counterexample to the claim that one cannot bootstrap oneself into knowing that one’s judgment is the result of a distinct and (superior) method. Inasmuch as this case works, I think it does so because it combats one moral conviction – that access to moral knowledge isn’t a matter of genealogical luck – with another, stronger moral conviction: that homosexuality is ethically unobjectionable.

That in some cases it seems plausible to say that getting it right *is* a matter of genealogical luck – the luck of growing up in an unbigoted household, or not being a brain-in-a-vat, or having had math lessons – is some reason to think that



we should abandon the moral conviction that drives us to say that some kinds of knowledge are immune from genealogical luck. Another reason, is that we can draw a distinction between doing well (or poorly) on one hand, and being praiseworthy (or blameworthy) on the other. That some group has the good fortune of possessing a knowledge-conducive genealogy – and another the bad fortune of not – hardly makes the former praiseworthy or the latter blameworthy, anymore than I am praiseworthy for being in a position to know I have hands, and my brain-in-a-vat counterpart blameworthy for not being in such a position. Drawing this distinction goes some small way, perhaps, toward alleviating concerns about the moral repugnance of a view that embraces the importance of genealogical luck for philosophical knowledge. But it certainly, I admit, does not go all the way.

### 3.2 Anti-realism about philosophical truths

I've said that we are in search of stable ground – an epistemological framework and a conception of what we're doing when we do philosophy that, taken together, does not imply that we lack philosophical knowledge. In the last section I suggested that an epistemological framework that embraces genealogical luck is one way of finding such stable ground, albeit with some uneasy consequences. An alternative is to change our conception of what we're doing when we do philosophy. Throughout this paper I've assumed a realism about philosophy's subject matter – that what we're after are the mind-independent philosophical truths. Some genealogical debunking arguments precisely target such realism; for example, Street's evolutionary debunking argument against metanormative realism intends to show that *if* one accepts metanormative realism *then* one must accept that we lack moral knowledge. Her solution is not to accept moral ignorance, but rather to embrace some sort of metanormative anti-realism – one that is not susceptible to the debunking argument. If the evaluative truths are constitutively connected to an agent's beliefs about the evaluative truths such that, by necessity, they cannot come wildly apart, then the debunker's argument is blocked. Another way of putting

the thought is this: if the evaluative truths are relative to agents' evaluative beliefs, then no one will be able to suffer from bad genealogical luck when it comes to evaluative knowledge; evaluative knowledge will be open to all, regardless of where they come from. By adopting a suitable anti-realism about a domain of philosophical judgment, one can retain one's (relatively luck-intolerant) epistemology while holding onto knowledge in that domain.

A related alternative is to think of the subject matter of philosophy not as the mind-independent truths about, e.g. knowledge or free will or the good, but rather our *concepts* of knowledge, free will or the good. This is the sort of metaphilosophical view that Bernard Williams held, at least as it applied to our moral and political commitments and concepts. (Williams famously thought that in the case of scientific knowledge, a genealogically-transcendent 'absolute perspective' was possible.) Commenting on Rorty's proposal that liberals adopt an ironic attitude towards their own political commitments (see §2.5.3), Williams wrote:

[O]nce one goes *far enough* in recognizing contingency, the problem to which irony is supposed to provide the answer does not arise at all...[B]ecause we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours; or, more precisely, has made both us, and made the outlook as something that is ours...We and our outlook are not simply in the same place at the same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it, we can be free of what is indeed another scientific illusion, that it is our job as rational agents to search for, or at least move as best we can towards, a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free of contingent historical perspective (2000, 193-4).

For Williams, elucidating our contingent concepts and systematising our contingent judgments was no arbitrary project, for it was the project of making sense, he thought, of ourselves. One might hope to take a similar attitude about philosophy in general: its job, we might think, is not to get the world right, but rather to get ourselves right.

### 3.3 Rethinking philosophical ‘belief’

Sextus famously advised that we suspend judgment about all things, including the sceptic’s argument. Might the philosopher do the same in response to the genealogical sceptic – that is, simply suspend judgment on whether any of her philosophical judgments constitute knowledge, given their genealogies? But how, we might wonder, could such a philosopher possibly continue to philosophise? This worry is a version of what is known as the Apraxia Charge against Pyrrhonian scepticism. According to that charge, the sceptic who suspends judgment about everything is incapable of action, for action presupposes belief. Is it really possible for the philosopher to continue to perform philosophical actions – to entertain thought experiments, make arguments, deliberate and debate – all the while suspending judgment about all philosophical questions?

It depends of course what ‘suspending judgment’ really amounts to. According to Michael Frede (1979, 1984), the sceptics’ answer to the Apraxia Charge lies in §1.13 of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, in which Sextus seems to distinguish between two kinds of assent, only one of which he takes to be problematic in its dogmatism.<sup>44</sup> Dogmatic assent, Frede claims, involves an outright belief and assertion of how things really are, while non-dogmatic assent does not. This is how we are to understand the sceptic’s claim, in acting, to being merely guided by appearances (§1.21-24) and, in speaking, to be merely reporting how things

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<sup>44</sup> For a critical response, see Burnyeat 1980 and Burnyeat and Frede 1997.

seem to him (§1.21-24).<sup>45</sup> Thus Frede writes that “having a view involves one kind of assent, whereas taking a position, or making a claim, involves another kind of assent, namely the kind of assent the sceptic will withhold” (1984, 128), and “[t]o be left with the impression or thought that *p*...does not involve the further thought that it is true that *p*” (ibid., §133). If Frede’s reading is correct, then perhaps the philosopher might be able to act on – indeed philosophise on – her genealogically contingent judgments, without thereby being dogmatically committed to premises that undermine that very commitment. Indeed, in his discussion of how thought is possible for the sceptic, Sextus explains that we acquire our conceptual structure not through dogmatically assenting to various propositions, but rather through cultural transmission and education; acting in accordance with this conceptual structure then does not constitute dogmatism (§1.23 – 4).

I’m not in a position to comment on whether Frede’s interpretation of Sextus is correct. But I do think its application to the question of what stance one might take on one’s own philosophical judgments is interesting. It is true that cannot treat oneself as a purely psychological phenomenon; one must take up at least some of one’s views from the internal perspective to be able to think and act at all. This is what is certainly right in the Apraxia Charge. But according to Frede’s Sextus, there is a belief-like attitude that is somewhere in between outright belief and total psychologisation, between a wholehearted assent to *p* and the detached observation that one is inclined to judge that *p*. If there is indeed such a space, it might provide a home for the philosopher who finds her own epistemological commitments undermining themselves.<sup>46</sup>

There are other similar ways of rethinking what sort of attitudes we do or could take towards our philosophical commitments, such that those commitments are or would be robust against genealogical debunking. One might for example

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<sup>45</sup> That is (according to Frede), the key distinction is not between beliefs with different contents (how things are versus how things appear) but rather different kinds of doxastic attitude (one of full-on dogmatic belief, and another somehow short of that).

<sup>46</sup> Marcus Giaquinto suggested to me that this is roughly how we should understand Hume’s metaphilosophical outlook.

think that philosophers don't (or shouldn't) believe their views outright, but merely 'accept' them – where acceptance either amounts to some practical commitment to act as if they were believed them,<sup>47</sup> or some other belief, for example the belief that the philosophical view in question has various theoretical virtues<sup>48</sup>, or even practical ones.<sup>49</sup> To take refuge from genealogical scepticism by adopting such a metaphilosophical view would involve not merely reconceptualising what it is we are doing when we do philosophy, but perhaps changing our philosophical practice. For those (like me) who already take their relationship to many of their philosophical commitments not to be one of outright belief, this might be an attractive possibility. For others, such a change would simply mean that the sceptics have won.

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<sup>47</sup> Perhaps as an act of service to the general philosophical community – or perhaps more in the way one supports a sports team.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. van Fraassen's notion of scientific acceptance as the belief in the empirical adequacy of a theory (1980).

<sup>49</sup> I have in mind here the 'ameliorative metaphysics' advanced by Sally Haslanger (2000, 2005, 2012); cf. Burgess and Plunkett 2013 and Plunkett and Burgess 2013.

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