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**PRAGMATIC  
IDEALISM**

*Critical Essays on  
Nicholas Rescher's System of  
Pragmatic Idealism*

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**SKEPTICAL CHALLENGE AND THE BURDEN OF PROOF  
ON RESCHER'S CRITIQUE OF SKEPTICISM**

**I Introduction**

This paper will discuss Nicholas Rescher's treatment of skepticism. I will concentrate mainly on his argument presented in chapter two of the first part of his impressive *A System of Pragmatic Idealism*. Additionally, I will draw on other publications in which Rescher has dealt with skepticism (most notably in Rescher 1980).<sup>1</sup> While I entirely agree with Rescher's anti-skeptical result and many of his powerful and original arguments against skepticism, I nevertheless think that his treatment of skepticism, as it stands, falls short of an adequate response to the skeptical challenge. I want to suggest, however, that Rescher's pragmatic and methodological anti-skeptical argument is effective when supplemented by further considerations about pre-philosophical responses to the skeptical challenge.

The following discussion falls into four parts, the first of which deals, after a brief exposition of skepticism, with the aim Rescher sets himself for his anti-skeptical argument. In the second section, I will call to mind the main steps in Rescher's critique of skepticism, against which an objection will be raised in the third section. In the final section, I will try to show that Rescher's anti-skeptical position can be vindicated by pointing out the possibility of strictly "internal", pre-philosophical answers to skeptical questions.

**II. Moderate Anti-Skepticism?**

A skeptic, according to the original meaning of the word, is someone who, with respect to some issue of inquiry, is not convinced by any answer as yet given, but who is neither convinced that an answer is impossible, and thus

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<sup>1</sup> Rescher's *System* will be referred to by volume- and page-number as Rescher 1992-94.

continues to inquire into the matter at hand.<sup>2</sup> If this attitude becomes habitual, it amounts to a tacit admission that convincing answers to theoretical questions are just not to be had. But further, according to the ancient skeptics, if this attitude becomes habitual, it also amounts to happiness. Thus we should learn to balance argument by counter-argument in order to remain undecided, uninvolved, and tranquil (admittedly, a modest man's notion of happiness).

Modern skepticism, at least in its most typical form exemplified by Descartes' method of hyperbolic doubt, differs from its ancient predecessor mainly in two respects: first, its primary interest is theoretical, not practical; and second, it turns the tacit admission into an explicit denial of the availability of knowledge. It is only this specifically modern kind of skepticism (characterized, moreover, only in the most general and schematic way) which is our concern here. Thus, according to Rescher, a skeptic is someone who "insists that there just never is a satisfactory justification for accepting anything whatsoever" (Rescher 1992-94, vol. I, p. 15). A more familiar, but slightly less radical form of skepticism would claim that there never is sufficient justification for accepting anything *as knowledge*. Since construing skepticism as denying the availability of knowledge has certain advantages (which will emerge below), I will stick to this more moderate formulation.<sup>3</sup> Following Rescher, someone who holds, against the skeptic, that instances of knowledge are available (and that indeed they are in our possession) will be called a *cognitivist*.

Of course, skeptical doubt cannot spare the skeptical claim itself. There arises, then, for the skeptical position, the threat of self-refutation by explicit or implicit (pragmatic) inconsistency. It is a matter of dispute whether this consequence can be avoided, for instance by retreating to an attitude of mere doubt and denial which does not commit the skeptic to any positive claim. As I will argue below, however, even if skepticism could be shown to be inconsistent, this might be of little avail for the cognitivist if he cannot answer the skeptical challenge by justifying his knowledge-claims beyond skeptical doubt.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines*, Bk. I, sec. 1.

<sup>3</sup> In his *Scepticism*, Rescher himself construes the skeptical claim in terms of knowledge, rather than in terms of rational acceptance in general (cf. Rescher 1980, pp. 1 ff.). Obviously, any argument that tells against the moderate skeptic will tell against the radical skeptic, too. Since the converse does not hold, Rescher's arguments against skepticism in his *System*, explicitly directed only at the radical version, might be thought to possibly fail in refuting the moderate skeptic while succeeding in a refutation of the radical skepticism Rescher sets up as his target. However, I do not think that the distinction between radical and moderate forms of skepticism makes any difference to the overall assessment of the power of Rescher's arguments.

At first sight, there may seem to be only two options for a cognitivist response to skepticism: either one tries to refute the skeptical claim—or one simply ignores it. Various different refutations of skepticism have been proposed over the centuries, from charges of inconsistency over claims to indubitable knowledge to transcendental arguments. Needless to say that no such refutation has remained undisputed. Unconvinced by the attempts to *prove* that the skeptic is wrong, but nevertheless confident in their possession of commonsense, scientific, or metaphysical knowledge, other philosophers have shrugged off the skeptical claim as an example of obviously unreasonable, if irrefutable nonsense that should best be ignored by serious thinkers. Both options, which may or may not be accompanied by a diagnosis of the sources of the skeptic's mistake<sup>4</sup>, have their serious drawbacks: While ignoring skepticism comes dangerously close to an irresponsible dogmatism, the attempts to refute skepticism can often be seen, at least with historical hindsight, as sadly inadequate.

Now one of the striking features of Rescher's treatment of skepticism is that he avoids dogmatism by carefully arguing for his anti-skeptical position, while at the same time he rejects the quixotic task of an outright argumentative refutation of skepticism: "Argumentation is unavailing because any probatively cogent argument must proceed from conceded premises, and the skeptic can always simply refuse to make concessions. All that argumentation can do is to forestall skepticism by showing the incompatibility of the skeptic with positions acceptable to sensible people in general. Such argumentation may not dislodge someone from a skeptical position, but it should prevent somebody who has not taken this position from doing so in the first place" (Rescher 1992-94, vol. I, p. 35; cf. Rescher 1980, pp. 7-9). Thus, Rescher does not aim at a theoretical *refutation* of skepticism, but at pointing out its unacceptability to "sensible people". As Rescher rightly insists, part of being sensible consists in sharing the human goal of acquiring theoretical knowledge and cognitive understanding. Thus, Rescher's is a thoroughly *pragmatic defense* of cognitivism in that he rejects skepticism because it would make the achievement of a central element in human flourishing impossible: "Whatever the merits or demerits of skepticism as a theoretical position, we are entitled on practical grounds to dismiss it unceremoniously. For our human practice is inherently cognitive" (Rescher 1992-94, vol. I, p. 34).

The aim Rescher sets himself for his discussion of skepticism thus takes a

<sup>4</sup> Of course, someone who takes a "diagnostic" or "therapeutic" approach to skepticism (as developed for instance, in their different ways, by Heidegger and Wittgenstein) hardly can be said to "ignore" skepticism altogether; rather, the attitude then is one of not taking skepticism seriously as a tenable philosophical position that might be the target of argumentative criticism.

middle ground between the two extreme options mentioned above. As a mediating position, it holds the promise of avoiding the weaknesses of the extremes. At the same time, however, it stands in danger of evading what others might regard as the real problem. Even if one agrees that skepticism can be dismissed rather "unceremoniously", one may still suspect that Rescher undermines his entitlement to this attitude by granting the theoretical tenability of the skeptical position. Hence, the question is whether the moderate aim of Rescher's anti-skeptical argument can consistently be pursued.

Rescher admits that it is impossible to force a skeptic into giving up his position by means of theoretical argument. However, we must distinguish between two ways in which to account for this impossibility: Either the skeptic merely refuses to listen to the "voice of reason", unwilling or unable to take into account the arguments which demonstrate that skepticism is a rationally untenable position. Or, alternatively, the skeptic perfectly appreciates the strength of the anti-skeptical arguments, but rightly insists that they do not force her to give up her skeptical position (as long as she consistently avoids making the "concessions" the cognitivist arguments have to rely on). It is not entirely clear to me which course Rescher wants to pursue: On the one hand, Rescher insists that the skeptic is utterly irrational at least in any practical respect and in the end is even forced to abandon the project of cognitive rationality all together (*Ibid.*, p. 33); on the other hand, however, he admits that "merely theoretical argumentation cannot dislodge the skeptic from the stance of accepting no thesis at all" (*Ibid.*, p. 35). In any case, according to Rescher, his arguments do "not establish the internal inconsistency or theoretical untenability of a skeptical position" (*Ibid.*, p. 34). But if it is consistently possible not to accept even the best justified of our knowledge-claims, how can we maintain these claims without being dogmatic? This line of thought thus seems to confirm our reservations about Rescher's moderate anti-skeptical aim: *Either* the skeptical position involves a mistake the skeptic herself is rationally forced to admit *or* she is correct in her resistance to accept our knowledge-claims and we are simply being dogmatic in maintaining them.

Of course, this kind of reasoning itself rests on presuppositions which are not beyond dispute. In particular, there is the salient assumption that, if it is correct for one person to reject a knowledge-claim as unjustified, it cannot at the same time be correct for another person (in the light of the same evidence) to maintain that claim. But even if we regard the above reasoning as merely preliminary, it suggests the question whether it is really possible to keep sensible people from turning skeptic *without* establishing the "theoretical untenability" of skepticism. Any answer to this question will have to take the details of Rescher's argument against skepticism into account and to ask whether it succeeds in securing its moderately anti-skeptical aim.

### III. Rescher's Anti-Skeptical Argument in the *System*

In Part One, Chapter Two, of his *System of Pragmatic Idealism* Rescher presents a "critique of skepticism" which gives something like the essence of the various anti-skeptical arguments he has developed in previous publications. Since it would be impossible to summarize, on a few pages, what already is a brief digest, I will have to restrict myself to some reminders about Rescher's central ideas in that chapter. I will then go on to ask whether the argument achieves its moderately anti-skeptical aim.

Rescher starts by granting that, if it were "the case that rationally justified beliefs must *always* be based on some prior, rationally prejustified inputs, then the skeptic prevails straight off. For then the process of rationally validating our accepted beliefs can never get started" (Rescher 1992-94, vol. I, p. 15). However, Rescher responds to this threat with his distinction between "discursive" and "presumptive" justification (*Ibid.*, pp. 16-19). While discursive justification indeed proceeds on the basis of preestablished knowledge, justifying the claim at issue in the light of other claims already accepted as warranted, presumptive justification works on the model of "innocent until proven guilty" (*Ibid.*, p. 16). A standing presumption of this kind is in place, for instance, with respect to the deliverances of our senses and the testimony of reliable witnesses. "All in all", Rescher concludes, "presumption favors the usual and the natural" (*Ibid.*, p. 18).

Without relying on presumptively justified beliefs, the enterprise of cognitive rationality cannot get off the ground; they are "the raw material of cognition" (*Ibid.*, p. 17). Of course, not being infallible, presumptively justified beliefs are "vulnerable to being overturned, *but only by something else yet more secure*" (*Ibid.*; my emphasis). Thus it transpires why, in "the light of these considerations, the plausibility of skepticism takes on a rather different light" (*Ibid.*, p. 19): On the one hand, we cannot rationally avoid allowing "presumptive status to our presystematic indications of credibility", because doing so is required by "the most fundamental principle of cognitive rationality" (*Ibid.*); on the other hand, allowing for presumptive justification immediately blocks the skeptical argument, since now we have beliefs that can be denied the status of being justified only by recourse to other beliefs that are justified even *better*. This effectively undermines the skeptic's contention that there "never is satisfactory justification for accepting anything whatsoever".

The next step in Rescher's argument may be seen as defending a decisive assumption, made in the above considerations, against a possible skeptical counter-attack: Why, the skeptic might ask, should it be rationally imperative to grant presumptive status to perception, common sense, or testimony? Obviously, that is what most people actually do. But maybe this only shows that people are excessively gullible. All too often, beliefs that had been

accepted on a presumptive basis for centuries finally have turned out to be mistaken. In the light of past experience, it therefore seems rationally advisable to withhold one's consent to any assumption not established beyond doubt. And since, sadly, no assumption ever is established beyond doubt, the only rational course is the skeptical one.

As Rescher points out, this line of skeptical argument is based on a strategy of extreme cognitive risk-avoidance: "Do not make or accept a claim if there is any risk it might turn out to be mistaken." Of course, trying to minimize misfortunes (of any kind) is a central element in our notion of rationality. But when it comes to the cognitive domain, Rescher reminds us that there are "two fundamentally different sorts of misfortunes" (*Ibid.*, p. 21): Either one accepts a claim which in fact is mistaken—or one does not accept a claim which in fact is correct. Obviously, both cognitive "misfortunes" should be avoided as far as possible: "The sensible thing is to adopt the middle-of-the-road policy of risk calculation, acting as best we can to balance the positive risks of outright loss against the negative ones of lost opportunity" (Rescher 1992-94, vol. I, p. 22). But then the skeptic fares rather badly: "In claiming that their position wins out because it makes the fewest mistakes, skeptics use a distorted system of scoring. While they make the fewest errors of one kind, they make the most of another" (*Ibid.*, p. 23). Rescher admits that there is no one general policy of how to trade off one kind of risk against the other in a rational way. However, it is obvious that some kind of trade-off is necessary and that, whatever its details, the skeptical policy of risk-avoidance will appear quite unreasonable in its light.

This argument is an instance of the more general move Rescher proposes to take with respect to skepticism (as well as to other issues): the "methodological turn". Rescher assumes that the skeptic "insists on addressing the issue of rational acceptance at the level of particular theses: are we really in a position to accept this or that *p* or not?" (*Ibid.*, p. 25). Instead of answering these skeptical questions on the item level (where the skeptic appears to be in a strong position since he can always go on questioning any justification we may be able to give), we should better "begin by dealing with *methods* (standards, criteria) rather than particular *theses*" (*Ibid.*). On this methodological level, "we see that the skeptic's risk-avoidance policy is simply not one that is rational to adopt" (*Ibid.*, p. 26). As a cognitive strategy or policy, aiming at cognitive success, skepticism obviously is irrational in that it would *make impossible the very success it ought to help us to achieve*: "Never bar the path of inquiry", Peirce rightly insisted. The trouble with skepticism is that it aborts inquiry at the very start" (*Ibid.*, p. 25).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The underlying assumption, however, that the skeptic will want to address the issue "at the level of particular theses", may well be questioned. A skeptic, in order to argue for her

Rescher then goes on to discuss another deficiency of skepticism: its practical consequences. Rescher's point is not the traditional charge, voiced most famously by Hume, that skepticism would make any kind of activity impossible so that men would "remain in total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence".<sup>6</sup> Already the ancient skeptics maintained against this charge that after all it is possible to act merely on impulse, just "following the appearances" without taking a stand on what *really* is the case. But as Rescher points out, this attitude, although it allows the skeptic to consistently deny the possibility of knowledge and justification, has two consequences that speak rather strongly against the skeptical position: First, it severs every link between rationality and action, thereby leaving us without a *reason* for what we do. And this, as Rescher laconically notes, "is eminently unsatisfying" (Rescher 1992-94, vol. I, p. 29). But second, and perhaps even more disastrously for the skeptical case, the ensuing nonrational attitude *a fortiori* would leave us without a reason to become skeptics.

In the next step of his "critique of skepticism", Rescher turns to the question of how, in general, presumptions can be justified. He proposes a "fundamentally economic rationale", comparable to the credit rating system of a bank (*Ibid.*, p. 30), according to which we first grant presumptive status to "the usual and the natural" simply because of "the generic need for true presumptions continued with the mere convenience of these presumptions. But ultimately, a this-or-nothing recognition of the validity of a presumption emerges *ex post facto* through the utility (both cognitive and practical) of the results it yields" (*Ibid.*, p. 29). By accepting some claims without prior warrant, we gain a (defeasible) basis on which inquiry can proceed; if successful, the results of this inquiry in turn can serve as the basis for a

general contention (that knowledge just never is available) cannot restrict herself to criticize each knowledge-claim, one by one, since this would not take her very far. Rather, she has to rely on the assumption that our purported knowledge comes in epistemological kinds, such as "knowledge from sense-experience" and "knowledge based on inference" and so on, and then undermine our confidence in the items of each category by criticizing their standing in general. This procedure is employed in a paradigmatic way by Descartes in the First Meditation where he gets the hyperbolic doubt on the way by stating, first, that he will not have to show that all his former opinions are in fact mistaken ("which I would never be able to do"), but only to undermine their "foundations", and second, that all of his opinions he had until now taken to be most reliable were based on his senses, which, alas, so often betrayed him (*Meditations*, 17/18).—The importance of this move, and of the underlying "epistemological realism", for the case of skepticism has been highlighted by Michael Williams (Williams 1991).

<sup>6</sup> D. Hume, *Enquiry*, sec. 12, part II.

"retrovalidation" of the original assumptions. This strategy, which underlies our actual procedure in both common sense and science, obviously serves us quite well. On the other hand, doing without presumption would yield no cognitive or practical success at all. In this way, granting presumptive status to perception, testimony, and reason is justified by "considerations of economic rationality".

Now it may seem that the only available option with respect to our "this-or-nothing"-alternative may still be "nothing" rather than "this", if in fact the skeptic is correct in claiming that knowledge just is not to be had. However, in so doing "philosophical skeptics generally set up some abstract standard of absolute certainty" (*Ibid.*, p. 32) which cannot possibly be met and which, when regarded as a necessary condition of knowledge, immediately implies that knowledge is impossible. "But this inference is totally misguided. For what follows is rather the inappropriateness or incorrectness of the standard at issue" (*Ibid.*). Rescher quotes the old Roman legal principle according to which no one can be obliged to do what is beyond his means (*ultra posse nemo obligatur*). For the same reason, it would be undue to require for knowledge a kind of certainty which in principle is impossible to obtain. It is part of our notion of rationality "that we are entitled to regard the best that can be done as good enough" (*Ibid.*).

Rescher therefore concludes that the only remaining defense for the skeptic consists in a departure from the whole project of cognitive rationality. But in claiming that there just is no reason to accept the cognitivist's notion of rationality in the first place, the skeptic not only rejects the "ground-rules of our reasoning", but also the "ground-rules of our communication" which are part and parcel of them: "whatever satisfaction this drastic posture may afford the skeptic it has little appeal to those who do not already share this position, since (on its own telling) no cogent reason can be given for its adoption" (*Ibid.*, p. 33). To be sure, the abandonment of rationality "is a price that a fanatically dedicated devotee of the skeptical position may be willing to meet, but it is clearly one that people who are not so precommitted cannot possibly pay" (*Ibid.*).

Thus we have finally arrived at the conclusion that skepticism, although consistently tenable once it is adopted, nevertheless is a position that should not be adopted by a rational person in the first place. Rescher has built an argumentative containment-field around skepticism, leaving the "fanatically dedicated" skeptics to themselves, but effectively keeping rational people away from the skeptical position. It may seem that this is all that can be expected from a "critique of skepticism"—but in fact, it is not.

#### IV. Tragic Possibilities

There are two possible approaches a critique of skepticism may take: Either it attacks the skeptical *position* and its consequences or it counters the skeptical *arguments* against the possibility of knowledge and justification.

Rescher's critique is mainly of the first kind. It is extremely effective in showing that skepticism is a highly unattractive, unproductive, and uneconomic position. In fact, Rescher succeeds in showing that there can be no reason at all to adopt skepticism as a philosophical position or cognitive stance. But to the same degree in which he succeeds in revealing the unattractiveness of skepticism, Rescher makes it difficult to understand why a philosopher, and indeed any sane person, should be concerned with skepticism at all. Since the skeptical position is so clearly unreasonable, why have philosophers paid it so much attention? The answer to this question obviously has little to do with the attractions of skepticism as a philosophical *position*, but much with the force of the skeptical *arguments* purporting to show that knowledge is impossible.

Now at first sight it may seem that these two things, the skeptical position and the arguments in its favor, must stand or fall together. One might think that at least in final analysis there can be no convincing arguments for a philosophical view as unconvincing as skepticism. However, this ignores what may be called a *tragic possibility*. To see this, let us assume for the moment that the skeptical arguments against the possibility of knowledge are absolutely cogent. Now, this might not alter the fact that the ensuing skeptical position still is highly unattractive or even rationally untenable. But then, we would be caught in a paradox: If we start from the assumption that reason-giving and justification are possible, we would have to grant the force of the skeptical arguments; but these arguments would imply that justification is in fact not possible, which in turn means that we never have reason to accept any argument whatsoever, including the skeptical ones. Whichever way we finally decide, something will be wrong with the position we take.

This possibility deserves to be called tragic because it would face us with the choice between a position which is self-destructive (skepticism) and a position which is false (cognitivism). What adds to the disconcerting character of the problem is the fact that this is just the situation one would expect if skepticism in fact were correct. To rule out this tragic possibility, one has to show that the skeptical arguments against the availability of knowledge are not convincing.

These considerations strongly suggest that whatever is important about skepticism (in its modern variety under discussion) cannot be the attractions of the skeptical position, but must lie entirely in the force of the skeptical doubt. Even if there had never existed a single professing skeptic, the issue of

skepticism would not have been less pressing. The reason is that the skeptical challenge seems to arise from *within* our practice of reason-giving and justification. We require justification for our theoretical claims in order to settle the doubts someone might have about their correctness. But doesn't there always remain some possible doubt, some possibility of falsehood? Questions like these seem to arise naturally once we reflect on the fallibility and imperfection of our cognitive capacities. And it is questions like these which drive the skeptical arguments and lend force to the skeptical challenge. Once this challenge is acknowledged, it is extremely difficult to avoid the nagging doubt that *perhaps* all that we take ourselves to know in fact is mistaken—a doubt which is easily enhanced by appeal to so-called "skeptical possibilities" such as Descartes' "evil demon" hypothesis or the idea that we might just be "brains in a vat". And this admission alone might seem to show that even if we are materially correct in what we believe, at least do not *know* it. The sad consequence would be that knowledge simply is not available for us. And the force of the line of thought leading to this conclusion would not be diminished by the fact the conclusion itself issues in an unattractive position.

This means that an effective critique of skepticism cannot restrict itself to pointing out the deficiencies of the skeptical position. Rather, it must answer the skeptical challenge by showing how, in the face of skeptical questions, knowledge is possible. In particular, it has to answer the various skeptical arguments to the effect that knowledge, in fact, is not possible. It seems therefore that Rescher, although he is extremely successful in revealing the weaknesses of skepticism as a philosophical position, nevertheless fails to offer a convincing response to the skeptical challenge.<sup>7</sup>

Now I hasten to add that, at least in one important respect, this criticism immediately evaporates once we consider not only Rescher's anti-skeptical argument in the *System*, but also his discussions of skepticism in earlier publications. In his book *Scepticism*, Rescher offers a detailed discussion of nine major skeptical arguments (many of which date back to the ancient canons of skeptical "modes"). There, over and above using the standard machinery of anti-skeptical arguments, Rescher develops original and highly effective instruments to answer the skeptical challenge, such as his distinctions between "transcendental" and "mundane certainty" (Rescher 1980, pp. 37 ff.) and between "G-doubt" (based on absolutely general considerations) and "S-doubt" (arising from case-specific features of the particular situation) (Rescher 1980,

<sup>7</sup> It will not do to point to the fact that the whole first part of Rescher's *System* is devoted to showing how knowledge is possible and should therefore be taken as part of Rescher's response to skepticism. His procedure in the following chapters obviously, and quite reasonably, presupposes that the skeptical challenge has been answered (in the chapter on skepticism).

pp. 101 ff.). Two of these instruments, the distinction between presumptive and discursive justification and the *ultra posse*-principle, reappear in the chapter on Skepticism in the *System*.

However, I do not think that Rescher's dismantling of skeptical arguments does enough to rule out the tragic possibility outlined above. With respect to the principle *ultra posse nemo obligatur* I want briefly to indicate what I believe to be true also in respect to Rescher's other anti-skeptical counter-arguments: Their considerable force notwithstanding, they ultimately have to rely on the kind of pragmatic considerations also employed in the *System*. These considerations, however, already *presuppose* the availability of a cognitivist position, and thus the ineffectiveness of skeptical arguments against the possibility of knowledge, in that they argue for cognitivism solely by pointing out the deficiencies of a skeptical position.

In Rescher's rebuttal of skeptical arguments in his *Scepticism*, the *ultra-posse*-principle (according to which obligation cannot extend beyond the possible) is appealed to more than once, sometimes as part of the central move in an anti-skeptical argument (Rescher 1980, pp. 75 ff.), at other occasions merely as an additional or supporting consideration (e.g. Rescher 1980, pp. 125; 137; 150; 182; 227). It is not saying too much that the *ultra-posse*-principle is one of the cornerstones of Rescher's critique of skepticism as presented in that book. And in fact, that principle is an extremely strong weapon in the cognitivist's hand. If skeptics want to argue that none of our beliefs really qualifies as knowledge, they will have to insist on a highly demanding notion of knowledge. Therefore, skeptics typically put much emphasis on the requirement of certainty (which they interpret rather rigorously). Now, whatever necessary condition *C* a skeptic may require for knowledge, if it is impossible for anyone to meet that condition, the *ultra-posse*-principle will imply that we cannot be required to meet *C* in order to be said to know something. But only if that condition cannot possibly be met does it suffice to establish the skeptical conclusion that knowledge is impossible. It thus seems to follow from the *ultra-posse*-principle that any notion of knowledge that would serve the skeptic's purpose is illegitimate.

But in fact, the skeptic who claims that our beliefs never possess the kind of certainty required for knowledge is far from being refuted. First, he may simply reject the *ultra-posse*-principle, albeit at the cost that the skeptical challenge no longer can be maintained from within our ordinary epistemic practice (which clearly relies on the *ultra-posse*-principle). But even if the skeptic accepts that principle, it still doesn't follow immediately that any notion of knowledge demanding enough for the skeptical case would be illegitimate. This consequence follows only if a further premise is assumed to the effect that people stand under an obligation to know. Of course, there are many situations, particularly those in which people have issued claims to

knowledge, where an obligation to know seems to be in place. But here it shows that the *ultra-posse*-principle in fact is a two-edged sword, for the skeptic may now insist that it is not his notion of knowledge which is illegitimate, but rather our practice of issuing and accepting knowledge-claims. If indeed we may require only what is possible, the skeptic infers by *modus tollens*, then no one can be required to know something since knowledge is impossible to obtain.

We now can see that the issue really depends on whether or not the notion of knowledge on which the skeptic relies in fact is appropriate. In regarding absolute certainty and the impossibility of doubt as necessary conditions for knowledge, the skeptic claims to employ features present even in our ordinary epistemic practice. If this is the appropriate notion of knowledge, then knowledge indeed is impossible. On the other hand, there is an established practice of issuing and accepting knowledge-claims, which practice obviously presupposes that knowledge is possible. Thus the skeptic as well as the cognitivist each has reason to assume that his respective notion of knowledge is the appropriate one. As we just have seen, the *ultra-posse*-principle alone does not allow us to adjudicate between the two opposing views.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to say that the *ultra-posse*-principle can be of no use for Rescher's anti-skeptical argument. But that principle has to be supplemented by further, independent considerations about the *adequacy* and *reasonableness* of our epistemic practice, of the way we actually strive for knowledge and often take ourselves to be in its possession. These considerations, as Rescher has forcefully argued, can only be of a pragmatic character, showing how a practice based on a reasonable notion of knowledge, a notion which makes knowledge humanly accessible, lies in our best theoretical and practical interest. Rescher himself has offered convincing arguments to this effect. The only problem is that these are just the pragmatic and methodological arguments showing the supremacy of a cognitivist over a skeptical *position*. As Rescher himself seems

<sup>8</sup> As I just argued, in order to use that principle as a lever against skepticism the cognitivist must rely on the assumption that people indeed are obliged or required to gain knowledge and information. Although Rescher himself obviously subscribes to this assumption, once it is contested he cannot argue even hypothetically from this assumption to the possibility of knowledge by using the *ultra-posse*-principle, because according to this principle the possibility of knowledge must be *presupposed* in assuming that we are obliged to gain knowledge.—Another principle, which has received much attention in the recent debates about skepticism is the so-called "principle of epistemic closure", according to which someone who knows that *p*, and knows that *p* implies *q*, thereby knows that *q* (cf. e.g. Dretske 1970 and Nozick 1981). Although a denial of this principle is an effective means against many skeptical arguments, the real question is whether or not epistemic closure is part of our notion of knowledge—a question which obviously cannot be decided by appeal to the principle in question or its denial.

to be willing to admit, his case against skepticism, both in the 1980 book and in the *System*, in the end relies on pragmatic considerations meant to show that skepticism is an utterly unreasonable view: "The argument deployed here is thus at bottom also an essentially practical one . . . it shows that the price we would pay in taking such a position is so high as to outweigh any real benefit that could possibly accrue from it" (Rescher 1992-94, vol. I, p. 34; cf. Rescher 1980, pp. 226 ff.). But as indicated by the tragic possibility sketched at the beginning of this section, the first question with respect to skepticism is not whether we should choose a skeptical rather than a cognitivist position, but whether we have any choice at all.

I believe that here we find the deep reason for being dissatisfied with Rescher's moderate anti-skeptical aim: Rescher wants to keep us from becoming skeptics, while admitting that skepticism is theoretically tenable and consistent. When compared with the strength of cognitivism, skepticism just ain't good enough. But in presenting the issue as one of comparative strengths and weaknesses, Rescher already presupposes that we really have a choice to make between skepticism and cognitivism. However, as long as the skeptical arguments against the possibility of knowledge stand unanswered, or are answered only by recourse to pragmatic considerations which already presuppose that a cognitivist position is available, no such choice may be assumed. It therefore seems to me that Rescher, the subtlety and power of his anti-skeptical polemic notwithstanding, does not give a fully satisfying response to the skeptical challenge.

As mentioned before, the kind of modern skepticism under discussion differs from its ancient precursor in restricting itself to a purely theoretical problem (the availability of knowledge), without claiming that the skeptical attitude will turn out to be the safe road to happiness. Now, somewhat ironically, the central tenet of Rescher's essentially pragmatic argument against skepticism consists in the idea that skepticism makes human happiness impossible. As I just argued, this idea, although correct and highly important, does not suffice as the basis of a convincing answer to modern skepticism. It should be noted, however, that this idea presents an important argument against the ancient variety of skepticism: foregoing knowledge involves a loss of happiness that seems not really to be offset by any increase in tranquillity.

The result of the preceding reflections might be summarized by saying that Rescher, although he succeeds in answering the skeptical challenge *indirectly*, by undermining the skeptical position, does not go far enough on the way of giving a *direct*, head-on answer to the skeptical arguments. After all, the skeptic explicitly denies the legitimacy of the knowledge-claims we make in everyday life, in juridical and scientific discourse, and in all other contexts. The skeptical doubt relies on the fact that there is no such thing as dogmatic knowledge: a belief qualifies as knowledge only if it is, over and above being



true, sufficiently justified. Now the skeptic denies that any justification we may be able to offer in support of our beliefs and assertions ever is sufficiently justified. This would mean that the skeptic, when confronted with some piece of justification, always is able to ask questions such as "But does this really mean that you know it?", "And how do you know *that*?" or "But can you be *sure* about that?". These questions seem to leave only two options to the person who claims to know something: Either she answers the skeptic's question, and then the skeptic will ask another question of the same kind, or she does not answer and admit (explicitly or implicitly) that her claim was not sufficiently justified. In both cases, simply maintaining the claim in face of the skeptical questions would be dogmatic.

Since it is the cognitivist who claims to know something, her position seems to be much weaker than the skeptic's in that it is the cognitivist with whom the burden of proof lies. Rescher has argued that this burden might be returned to the skeptic by insisting on the distinction between presumptive and discursive justification (Rescher 1980, pp. 184 *ff.*; *cf.* Rescher 1992-94, Vol. I, pp. 16 *ff.*). Other anti-skeptical instruments employed by Rescher (such as the distinction between general doubt and situation-specific doubt) serve a similar purpose. But as I suggested above, the way Rescher uses these essentially pragmatic arguments as part of a general critique of skepticism already presupposes that we have a real choice to make between skepticism and cognitivism. Thus, his insistence on the crucial role of presumption for cognitive rationality can shift the burden of proof to the skeptic only if we assume that the project of cognitive rationality is not, from its very beginning, doomed to fail. As Rescher rightly insists, on a general, philosophical level of argumentation, this is the best we can do. But as I want to suggest in the final pages of this paper, there might be, on the level of commonsense, juridical, and scientific justifications of knowledge-claims an effective response to the skeptical challenge—a response which, although decidedly non-philosophical in itself, is of immediate relevance for a philosophical critique of skepticism. In other words, if it were possible to answer the skeptical questions in non-philosophical contexts, without explicitly relying on general epistemological theses, this would shift the philosophical burden of proof back to the skeptic. He would then have to give some general, philosophical reason why our claims to knowledge, that can be defended in the contexts in which they arise, *nevertheless* are not "really" justified at all—something the skeptic is not likely to be able to do.

## V. Moore and the Internal Response to Skepticism

What we are looking for is a non-dogmatic way to answer skeptical

questions without relying on philosophical argument. I believe that we can find something coming fairly close to this feat in G. E. Moore's "Proof of an External World" (Moore 1939), even though at its surface Moore's argument may rather seem to be an example of extreme dogmatism.<sup>9</sup> The larger part of Moore's famous article (which was adapted from a talk and essentially appeals to the presence of an audience) is devoted to a proper understanding of the sense in which there are things, according to realism, that are "external to the mind". After an examination of the distinction between two senses of "external" in Kant's "Refutation of Idealism" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 274-279), Moore concludes that things are "external," in the relevant meaning of the term, just in case they exist independently of anyone's having experiences (Moore 1939, p. 163). He goes on to point out that something is not a physical object, and not a particular kind of physical object such as a soap-bubble or a sheet of paper, unless it is "logically independent" of someone's having experiences. But then, as Moore correctly insists, it *follows* from the fact, if it is one, that there is a soap-bubble and a sheet of paper, that there are things "external to the mind". Now here comes Moore's proof: He lifts one hand, saying "Here is a hand", then lifts the other, saying "Here is another hand". From these premises, it follows that there exist at least two human hands at the given time. And from this it follows that there are things external to the mind.

No doubt this is a valid inference. But of course, as Moore acknowledges, his proof succeeds only if the premises actually qualify as knowledge. That they in fact do so, Moore emphatically asserts: "How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case [that Moore had two hands while gesturing with them]! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking -- that perhaps after all I'm not, and that it's not quite certain that I am" (*Ibid.*, p. 166).

Although Moore argues very carefully and his final "proof", in its extreme simplicity, is nothing less than a stroke of genius, he probably has not succeeded in convincing many of his listeners and readers. Most philosophers seem to believe that Moore fails spectacularly because he does not notice that he assumes just what is in question.<sup>10</sup> According to this kind of criticism,

<sup>9</sup> Recently, Jay Rosenberg has offered an illuminating interpretation and defense of Moore's "proof" of an external world (Rosenberg 1994). Despite some differences in detail, both his starting point and his conclusions overlap in many respects with the position developed here.

<sup>10</sup> Thus, Wittgenstein begins his reflections on certainty with the remark: "If you do know that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest. (When one says that such and such a proposition can't be proved, of course that does not mean that it can't be derived from other propositions; any proposition can be derived from other ones. But they may be no

Moore's response to skepticism is dogmatic. However, as I will try to show, this criticism misses the real strength of Moore's anti-skeptical attitude.

Barry Stroud, in his profound reflection on the significance of skepticism, interprets Moore's proof as a reminder, addressed to the skeptic, that we obviously are in the possession of knowledge and that therefore the skeptic's claim must be false. Moore refuses, or is really unable, to understand the skeptic's denial in any but the most obvious sense (Stroud 1984, p. 119). According to Stroud, Moore clings firmly to an "internal reaction" to the skeptical challenge (*Ibid.*, p. 117). His reaction is internal in that it takes the question whether we have any knowledge about the external world at all in just the same way as one would take the question whether we have any knowledge about the causes of a certain disease: Moore attends to the matter at hand and asks himself whether he, or anybody, possesses any knowledge in that domain. This question is decided according to the standards internal to the domain in question. In the medical case, we may want to consult a recent reference book on that subject; in the case of the external world, we simply ask ourselves whether there is anything we know about external objects. Stroud writes: "I call this reaction 'internal' because it is a response from 'within' one's current knowledge . . . Given that conception of the question 'Is it known that *p*?', it seems to me that there is no good reason for denying that what Moore says about our knowledge of external things is perfectly correct" (Stroud 1984, p. 117).

By contrast, the skeptic wants to question our knowledge from an "external" perspective. She does not take for granted that there are legitimate knowledge-claims, but asks whether we have *any knowledge at all*. It may seem that as a response to this kind of external question, Moore's reliance on particular examples is dogmatic. However, as Stroud points out, there is a problem of how to express this skeptical question in a way that does not lend itself to the innocent "internal" reading given to it by Moore. After all, what is specific about the external question the skeptic wants to ask is not its generality, since Moore's is an answer to a completely general question. ("Do we have any knowledge?"—"Yes, we do.") Maybe we want to say that the skeptic does not just question whether we actually have any knowledge, but whether it is *possible* for anyone to have knowledge in a certain domain at all. But as Moore reminds the skeptic, we *actually* do know many things; and this trivially establishes the *possibility* of knowledge, too. Remains only for the skeptic to ask *how* anyone can know, say, that there is a hand. But again, there are

more certain than it is itself . . .)" (*On Certainty*, § 1). More recently, Thomas Nagel has ridiculed Moore's argument as the vain attempt to turn "one's back on the abyss [between grounds for belief and the facts, M.W.] and announce that one is now on the other side" (Nagel 1986, p. 69).

perfectly correct, but absolutely trivial, internal answers: We can know that there is a hand by looking at it, for instance, or by touching it, or, in one's own case, by moving one's fingers or by touching something with it. Obviously, this is not the kind of answer the skeptic expects. But it is a *correct* answer to a question posed in the very words the skeptic would want to use ("How do you know that here is a hand?").

It is easy to think of many examples which show that, in non-philosophical contexts, giving internal answers to skeptical questions will be completely adequate. Imagine, for example, a reviewer for a journal in experimental physics who advises the editors to reject a paper on the grounds that, since the authors may have been deceived by an evil demon, their results have not been established beyond doubt and therefore should not be published. Obviously, this advice would be completely off the mark. The important point is that no dogmatism will be involved on the side of the editors if they accept the paper for publication, as long as the results presented in the paper meet the standards operative within physical research.<sup>11</sup> Similar examples could be given for common sense claims in everyday situations or for testimony in the courtroom. In all these situations, it obviously would be irrational to agree with the skeptic that no knowledge is possible in the given context. Rather, it is the skeptic who is plainly irrational in her appeal to irrelevant hypotheses and simply mistaken in her denial of knowledge.

As Stroud argues convincingly, we can understand Moore's general strategy, in spite of some slips unnoticed by him, as an attempt to resist an "external", philosophical understanding of the skeptic's question. But if this is the point Moore wants to make, he undermines it by acknowledging that there is a need for a *proof* of an external world. Moore's talk of a "proof" derives from Kant. He opens his lecture with Kant's famous complaint about the "scandal to philosophy" that the existence of the external world still had to be accepted on faith, without satisfactory proof (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B xxxix). In accepting this challenge and attempting to give the required proof, Moore already has broken with his refusal to play the skeptic's game. But it is just this refusal that seems to be the point of his response to the skeptic. If it really is "absurd" that we should not know of such elementary things as our having hands (here and now, while we are waving them about), it is equally absurd to ask for a proof of an external world. Thus, the tension, or perhaps even the inconsistency, in Moore's "proof" is this: If he is right to take his premises for granted, there is no need for a proof.

<sup>11</sup> One might object to this example that scientific theories actually never are "known" in the sense under discussion here. However, at least when it comes to the scientist's reports about experimental results, reports based on simple observation of scientific instruments, these claims will have to be regarded as plainly true and sufficiently justified, i.e. as known.

What we can learn from Moore is not that a proof of an external world is easy to come by, but rather that there is a rational stance from which such a proof will appear unnecessary. There is a completely reasonable attitude towards the skeptical challenge which consists in taking the skeptic to be like a child or a madman who asks ignorant and sometimes strange questions which nevertheless have perfectly straightforward answers. Notice that according to this attitude, the ignorance is completely on the skeptic's side, where in fact it belongs. There is nothing ignorant or absurd about the "internal" response itself. And since it takes critical questions about our knowledge at face value and seriously examines their (internal) legitimacy, *no dogmatism, no unwarranted prejudice for one's own beliefs is involved*. Moore's internal attitude is simply the reasonable attitude to take in ordinary life, in the courtroom, or the laboratory.<sup>12</sup>

Now this might seem to amount to nothing more than the familiar study/life-distinction, famously acknowledged by Hume. After all, a philosopher knows that the skeptic is not an ignorant child. For the philosopher, it may therefore not be as unproblematic to resist the external perspective as it is unproblematic for the lay person. Perhaps the philosopher in fact *is* irrational when he treats the skeptic like a child, knowing that he isn't? In other words, the question is whether the philosopher, not being excused by the "naivety" of the lay person, is entitled to an internal reaction to skeptical questions at all. Thus Stroud, despite his sympathetic understanding of Moore's strategy, in the end does not accept an internal reaction as a satisfactory response to the skeptic (Stroud 1984, pp. 126-7). Part of his reason for this attitude seems to be the impression that an internal response involves a gross misunderstanding of the skeptic's real motivation.

It is true that within a philosophical exchange about the possibility of knowledge, one cannot simply adopt a perspective "internal" to common sense or science, if only because this would involve changing the subject. If a philosopher wants to give internal answers to skeptical questions, she can do so only *ironically* (in the original sense of "playfully pretending"), acting *as if* she missed the philosophical interest behind the questions. However, to make her point the cognitivist will not have to adopt (be it seriously or ironically) an internal attitude at all. What matters is only the fact that, within a given non-philosophical context, satisfactory answers to skeptical questions are available.

<sup>12</sup> The possibility to maintain this attitude in the face of skeptical questions precisely depends on a *tacit* employment of the principles and strategies Rescher *explicitly* brings to bear against skepticism on the level of philosophical argument. For instance, a judge will simply dismiss an attorney's attempt to question the reliability of a witness if the attorney argues only on the basis of a general doubt about the possibility of knowledge; what would be required are situation-specific reasons for doubting the statement of the witness.

This fact establishes that typically our knowledge-claims can be perfectly justified according to the standards relevant in the context in which they arise—even in the face of skeptical questions.<sup>13</sup>

As long as the skeptic confines himself to applying "internal" standards, he is unable to undermine the legitimacy of our knowledge-claims even in paradigmatically strict practices of epistemic evaluation such as science or jurisdiction. This means that although it is the cognitivist who issues a claim and thus accepts a justificatory debt, the *philosophical* burden of proof lies with the skeptic as long as the cognitivist can offer an internally satisfactory justification for her claim. It is up to the skeptic to show that this justification is not good enough. Since the justification *is* good enough according to the case-specific and context-specific standards we actually employ, the skeptic would have to show that these standards are somehow inappropriate. And as long as an internal reaction to skeptical questions is rationally available, arguments for *changing* our epistemic practice cannot be based on an internal inconsistency of that practice. Thus, the skeptic will have to argue on the very philosophical and methodological level on which Rescher's critique of skepticism is situated.

We even may take this argument one step further. As we have seen, the question of whether the *ultra-possé*-principle tells against the skeptic ("We are under an obligation to acquire knowledge; thus knowledge must be possible") or rather against the cognitivist ("Knowledge is impossible; thus we may not put ourselves and others under an obligation to know") depends on what the correct notion of knowledge is and what kind of justification it requires of us. Now let us restrict our discussion to two possibilities: Either knowledge requires justification beyond any *possible doubt* (of which both sides agree that this is not to be had) or it requires justification beyond any *relevant doubt* (of which both sides agree that it mostly is available). Now the skeptic obviously does not restrict himself to the trivial claim that we never have "super-knowledge" (a *new* epistemic category which happens to require justification beyond any possible doubt). Rather, he holds that all our *ordinary* knowledge-

<sup>13</sup> Of course, the relevant standards themselves may rationally be questioned; but this presupposes the acceptance of other, equally internal standards of justification and knowledge. Thus, if we ask whether evolutionary explanations really lead to scientific knowledge, or if we ask whether so-called "genetic finger-prints" suffice to establish the identity of a suspect, we employ standards which mark a contrast between things we do know and things we don't. The only question with respect to such cases is whether the more specific standards (those of evolutionary theories or those of identification by genetic finger-prints) actually are in keeping with more general standards (those of scientific knowledge or juridical evidence). By contrast, as we noted already for a scientist or a judge, it obviously would *never* be rational to reject a scientific explanation or a piece of evidence simply on the basis of skeptical considerations which question that there is any knowledge about external objects at all.

claims are, strictly speaking, mistaken. He therefore will have to argue for the following two claims: 1. Our ordinary concept of knowledge requires justification beyond possible doubt. 2. We consistently misapply our ordinary concept of knowledge. However, both claims are mutually exclusive, since nothing could show what concept of knowledge we actually employ if not the consistent use we make of it.

As is shown by the availability of an internal response to skeptical questions, the standard of knowledge we actually employ is such that, in the vast majority of cases, it can easily be met. Since our epistemic practice is the only neutral source of information about what our ordinary concept of knowledge does, or does not, require, it seems that the two claims the skeptic must make are both untenable: Our ordinary concept of knowledge only requires justification beyond *relevant* doubt (where what is relevant depends on topic and context); and we do apply that concept correctly (even when challenged by skeptical questions).

## VI. Conclusion

In the first two sections of this paper, I argued that Rescher provides a convincing critique of skepticism, considered as a philosophical position, by pointing out its deficiencies when compared to cognitivism. However, as I tried to show in the third section, this argument already presupposes that cognitivism is an available position, which is just what is questioned by the skeptical arguments against the possibility of knowledge. Thus we were threatened by the *tragic possibility* that perhaps skepticism in fact is a highly unattractive position, but knowledge nevertheless is impossible. On a philosophical level of argumentation, the debate about whether our concept of knowledge really requires something impossible (e.g. the absence of any possible doubt), soon reaches an impasse which cannot be overcome by recourse to means such as the *ultra-posse*-principle. I therefore suggested to look for a convincing *pre*-philosophical way of dealing with skeptical doubts about knowledge, which, so I argued, can be found in Moore's "internal" response to skepticism. What the availability of this kind of response shows is that the concept of knowledge we actually employ does not commit us to an overly demanding standard which could never be satisfied. Rather, our ordinary concept of knowledge requires justification only beyond any *relevant* doubt, which kind of justification mostly can be given without any problem.

This means that Rescher is correct after all in presupposing that we do have a real choice between a skeptical and a cognitivist position in philosophy, since a) our actual practice is based on a cognitivist conception of knowledge but b) it nevertheless cannot be shown by the skeptic to be inconsistent. Thus,

the philosophical burden of proof lies squarely with the skeptic, who has to motivate a *departure* from our established practice and the notion of knowledge it implicitly employs. But chances are dim for such a reform, since Rescher has demonstrated beyond any (relevant) doubt that when faced with the choice between cognitivism and skepticism, the former is by far the more attractive and reasonable position to take.

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