ARBITRARY REASONS

We should avoid any action or belief that is arbitrary, not based on a reason, which is a consideration suggesting that we ought to perform that action or adopt or maintain that belief. This claim seems central to our lives as rational creatures, yet I shall argue against it. Doing so will allow me to resist the threat of skepticism the claim initiates. On the one hand, it unleashes the threat of theoretical skepticism, which says that since ultimately we have no reason to believe anything about the way things are, our views should all be dropped. On the other it motivates practical skepticism, which says that because we ultimately have no reason to do one thing rather than another, we should do nothing. The so-called regress argument is perhaps the most prominent source of the threat of theoretical skepticism. Since we should eschew any arbitrary belief, the regress skeptic says, we should never in the first place have believed the most fundamental claims we use as support for other views. We had no reason to believe them. Justification must begin somewhere, yet all beginnings are arbitrary and hence unacceptable. The practical skeptic can reason analogously: since we ought never to do anything arbitrarily, we ought never to have adopted the most fundamental goals we use as the basis for our less fundamental desires and as the ultimate rationale for all of our acts.

Most of my essay will deal with theoretical skepticism, which is far more commonly encountered than the practical sort. Much of my discussion will be concerned with foundationalism and coherentism, the most popular responses to the theoretical skeptic’s regress argument. Both are ways of trying to show that since our beliefs need not be arbitrary, the skeptic has no grounds for saying we should abandon them. Neither questions the skeptic’s fundamental assumption that we ought to avoid all arbitrary beliefs and acts. Precisely this assumption is my target. Once it is rejected, we can say that even if our beliefs and acts ultimately are arbitrary, the skeptic cannot conclude that we should stop believing and acting. The skeptic’s position no longer will be a threat to knowledge claims.

Nonetheless, I think skeptics should welcome the suggestion that we ought not avoid acts and beliefs simply because they are arbitrary. Perhaps the most common complaint against skepticism is that in a practical sense it is self-refuting; that is, anyone who wants to live cannot be either sort of skeptic, and anyone who proselytizes in its name cannot take it seriously. Skeptics are bad company for the same reason as are those who live a long life advocating suicide on the grounds that nothing is worth doing. If skeptics stopped suggesting that we ought never act or believe without a reason, however, they could avoid self-refutation. Skeptics do not refute themselves in making their central point that ultimately acts and beliefs are arbitrary.

In fact, that central point is correct. Foundationalism and coherentism notwithstanding, skeptics are correct when they emphasize that knowledge and rational belief are shot through with inescapably arbitrary elements. Unfortunately, I shall be able to offer

only the hint of an argument for this claim; I hope to do a more thorough job arguing that at some junctures it would be rational to do and believe things without reason.

REGRESSING WITH SKEPTICS

The forms theoretical skepticism takes are of course many; however, I shall limit my attention to two, namely the sort that relies on the regress argument and an offshoot thereof. Some clarification of these arguments will position us to refute them.

According to the regress argument, a reason to believe something is a considera-
tion suggesting that it is true. Moreover, all justification of my views, including views concerning what I ought to do, is inferential in the following sense: it takes the form of an argument with premises I believe, a conclusion, and a rule of deductive or inductive logic which says that the latter is probable given the truth of the former, or entailed by the former. If I am justified in some belief, I must have observed that it is 'probabilified' by my other beliefs, and this observation is at least part of my basis for believing what I do — or at least such an observation would be available to me if I were to seek it out. But the same holds for these other beliefs, and similarly for any belief on which I base them. Given that human beings cannot sustain infinitely regressing chains of beliefs, then my beliefs must ultimately rest on claims that are arbitrary. Yet arbitrary claims are unacceptable. I ought not believe them. But if I ought not believe my foun-
dational views, then I ought not use them as a basis for other beliefs. Hence I ought to unravel my entire scheme of beliefs from the bottom up. Let us call this argument regress skepticism.

What I shall call rule skepticism also assumes that reasons to believe something are considerations suggesting that it is true, and that justification is always inferential. But instead of worrying about regresses of premises, the rule skeptic points out that the trustworthiness of rules of implication and probabilification must be justified or at least justifiable if the use of these rules is to result in justified beliefs. Yet the only way the rules can be justified is to take for granted the sorts of conclusion for which those rules are the guidelines. The idea is that if we assume we have a set of good conclusions, then we can use them to test the rules that endorse those conclusions. Unfortunately, justifying rules this way is circular; we can either justify conclusions using rules whose trustworthiness we take for granted, or justify the trustworthiness of rules by taking conclusions for granted; either way our starting point involves completely arbitrary assumptions, claims not based on reasons. Since arbitrary assumptions won't do, we ought to abandon our beliefs.

Two main theses are involved in rule and regress skepticism. The first is one defended by almost all if not all skeptics; it is the view that our ultimate beliefs are arbitrary. We may as well call it the arbitrariness thesis. The second tenet is of more recent vintage: we ought not assent to arbitrary claims, where an arbitrary claim is one that, even upon some reflection, we cannot link to a consideration that suggests it is true. Recently Gilbert Harman labeled this tenet the principle of negative undermining.1 I shall follow his lead, except that I shall usually shorten Harman's label to 'the negative principle.'

Rule and regress skeptics, with their commitments to the arbitrariness thesis and the negative principle, will be the targets of my essay. I do not claim that any particular
historical figures adopted either form of skepticism. Still, while the fits are not perfect, regress skepticism has much in common with Pyrrhonism while rule skepticism shares a good deal with Humean skepticism.

Sextus's Pyrrhonism is neatly summed up in the following passage:

The Skeptic's end is quietude in respect of matters of opinion and moderate feeling in respect of things unavoidable. For the Skeptic, having set out to [decide which] sense impressions . . are true and which false, so as to attain quietude thereby, found himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgment; . . . there followed, as it happened, the state of quietude in respect of matters of opinion.2

As this passage reveals, Pyrrhonians did recommend avoiding any beliefs concerning the way things are. But they did not do so on the grounds that arbitrary beliefs ought to be eschewed. Instead, they did so on the grounds that avoiding factual judgments is the way to achieve equanimity.3 The Pyrrhonians's point was that if we are concerned to make factual judgments we cannot escape being tormented by the worry that our views are wrong, while if we drop the whole matter we can base our lives on the way things seem and thus achieve the happiness brought by not caring about what is really going on. To help us become carefree "in respect of matters of opinion," they prescribed a device that had worked for them: each time we are tempted to infer that things are some way on the grounds that they seem that way, we should take note of the fact that there are other ways things seem that appear to support a contrary judgment about the way things are. Such juxtapositions of the appearances caused the Pyrrhonians to suspend belief concerning reality, and they hoped the juxtapositions would work for us.

It seems clear that the upshot of such juxtapositions of the appearances is that they reveal the arbitrariness of each of our factual beliefs, and so it is tempting to explain any power they had to eliminate the beliefs of the Pyrrhonians by saying that the Pyrrhonians implicitly thought that we should never believe the arbitrary and that we typically act on this implicit thought. M. F. Burnyeat gives Pyrrhonism this sort of explanation in his influential essay "Can the Skeptic Live His Skepticism?", and he says that in the course of discussing Pyrrhonism Hume adopts it as well.4 Burnyeat claims that he and Hume agree on the core of an interpretation of Sextus's Pyrrhonism: Sextus thought that (1) our claims are demonstrably unfounded, (2) we should abandon unfounded claims, and (3) we will abandon our claims, "in the normal case," once we realize they are unfounded.5 Burnyeat goes on to claim that Hume's criticism of Pyrrhonism consisted in an undefended rejection of (3), that Hume ignores the argument Sextus gives for (3), and that he, Burnyeat, can make good on the rejection of (3): he can show that it is impossible to live without belief.

However, Burnyeat ought not attribute (2) to Sextus.6 True, it is difficult to understand how Sextus's juxtaposed appearances could wash away the beliefs of anyone other than those who subscribe to (2), those who do not think they ought to believe what they cannot show more likely to be correct than not. But Sextus would have considered (2) a piece of "dogmatism". So he said that steering clear of factual claims seems to help people who yearn for quietude reach their goal, and that suitable juxtapositions seem to have the causal power to rid us of these distressing claims, but was careful not to explain how, nor to say that his was the only doxicide capable of relieving us of pesky beliefs.7 Perhaps other devices would also work — such as a lobotomy.
Pyrhonian skepticism is thus quite different from its modern counterpart, regress skepticism; the former, unlike the latter, offers a prescription for living a worthwhile life. If it worked as promised, the prescription would not make our lives worthwhile, as Hume and Burnyeat pointed out, since a life without any beliefs is too much like a vegetable's existence. It is worth noting, however, that one way to think of my attempt to refute the modern skeptics's negative principle while leaving their arbitrariness thesis intact is to think of it as an attempt to fashion a livable form of skepticism. (There is another respect in which Pyrrhonian skepticism is unlivable; a less ambitious form of skepticism would work here as well: Pyrrhonianism suggests that once we give up the effort to reach the truth, we can live by the appearances. Yet if each appearance is paired to another which suggests a contrary view about what is going on, then we cannot base our lives on the way things seem after all.)

How about Hume's own skepticism? He did think that the trustworthiness of induction could be defended only if we take for granted claims whose defense requires induction, so that either our a posteriori views or our belief that induction is trustworthy is arbitrary. So he was to that extent a rule skeptic, though he limited the arbitrariness thesis to a posteriori beliefs and the rules of probabilification associated with such beliefs. Our knowledge of necessary truths he thought immune to skeptical doubt.

What about the rule skeptic's negative principle? Would Hume have said that we should avoid arbitrary beliefs since it is always irrational to believe something whose truth has not or cannot be shown likely? This would explain why he seemed worried about the discovery that all of our inductive inferences are based on an assumption that cannot itself be justified, namely the proposition that the future will resemble the past. But he did not use the "rational–irrational" terminology, and he never on any grounds (a fortiori on grounds of irrationality) recommended that we stop believing that the future will resemble the past. Instead, he famously claimed that we must make use of inductive argument, and we must believe various views with its help.\(^8\)

So much for the historical roots of rule and regress skepticism. Now I want to assess the merits of these arguments, starting with the negative principle on which they both rely. I shall give skeptics the arbitrariness thesis and whatever follows from it. The negative principle is my quarry. It should be rejected, I shall maintain, because honoring it is epistemically irrational. Epistemic rationality and irrationality, in turn, are defined in terms of what contributes to the goal of purely cognitive beings. So to defeat the negative principle, I must first discuss that goal.

THE NEGATIVE PRINCIPLE AND THE GOAL

Several philosophers, starting with Aristotle, have offered a rough characterization of rationality as efficient goal seeking. I accept this characterization. But our goals are many, and some of them have nothing to do with the aim of the purely cognitive beings who are the concern of epistemologists. These beings are a useful fiction, a simplifying device, invented for the purpose of clarifying ideal theoretical inquiry. We can characterize cognitive beings as ones whose efforts to fulfill their goal are efficient, and who are so narrow-minded and ruthless as to ignore all other aspirations (such as the various concerns of daily life); at least, we can do so once we have identified the aim of purely cognitive beings. The conduct of these fictional agents then defines a kind of rationality
— call it epistemic rationality. Epistemic rationality therefore includes a ‘practical’ element: it is designed to achieve the cognitive end.

Unfortunately, those who discuss this goal have not been especially careful. BonJour’s description of the epistemic goal — truth — is definitely not very clear, and by no means complete.\footnote{Are we supposed to maximize the total number of accurate claims we accept? Won’t that call for too much tolerance of false beliefs? An alternative description of the epistemic goal is one I, Richard Foley, and others before us have offered: to maximize one’s true beliefs while minimizing one’s false beliefs.\footnote{Unfortunately even this description is unacceptable because it is impossible to make sense of counting beliefs, and it is by no means obvious that the trade-off between truths and falsehoods should be numerical rather than a matter of the importance of the belief as a component of one’s whole belief scheme. Compare the following candidates for belief: (1) All physical objects attract each other inversely as the square of the distance separating them. (2) Some sand is on my porch.}}

Is the inverse square law one belief, and hence no more nor no less important a component of a belief scheme than a belief about the dirt on my stoop? And if so, then should the epistemic goal lead us to stop searching for laws of nature like the inverse square law once we notice that it is far easier to crowd our brains with trivial but uncontroversial beliefs like my observation about my sandy porch?

Talk in this context of ‘numbers’ of beliefs should be dropped altogether. If we do so we can provide a better characterization of the cognitive goal, I suggest: a complete and accurate understanding of what is the case. One could have a great number of correct beliefs (say ones about the sand on the beach), but they may amount to a terribly incomplete view of what is the case; they may amount to an accurate picture of trivial features of a small corner of the universe. Similarly, when put together, a collection of just a few of one’s beliefs might be so encompassing and accurate that it amounts to a very complete and accurate view. And this may be so even if none of them is strictly true, given the fact that accuracy is a matter of degree while truth is not: even if everything Newton claimed about the laws of nature were strictly speaking false since it needed correction in light of Einstein’s innovations, the Newtonian version is still quite accurate. Surely purely epistemic creatures should prefer a scheme of beliefs that includes Newton’s versions of the laws of nature over a scheme that focuses on trivial features of grains of sand even if all of the beliefs in the former are strictly speaking false while all of the beliefs in the latter are strictly speaking true. What the Newtonian claim lacks in accuracy it more than makes up in comprehensiveness.

Nothing I have said implies that our attaining the cognitive goal is necessary for us to be epistemically rational. I have characterized the goal of cognitive beings; I did not provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for rational belief. If we fail to meet the conditions in such a set we are considered irrational. By contrast, failing to meet the goal of rationality does not make us irrational. We are rational to the extent that our efforts to attain the cognitive goal are efficient given our resources.

In my formulation of the cognitive goal, I refer to what is the case, but I am assuming that one of the things that is the case is that various things ought to be the case,
where 'ought' is understood in its broadest sense.\textsuperscript{11} Some philosophers would argue that only the 'fact' component of the above goal is the concern of purely cognitive beings. Yet a cognitive being is concerned with any kind of truth, so unless we want to deny that there is such a thing as an ethical truth we must understand cognitive beings to be interested in ethical truths. Those who draw a sharp fact–value distinction can still adopt my statement of the cognitive goal, of course. They have only to reject my assumption, which must remain undefended here, that no sharp distinction exists.

If, as I have assumed, rationality is efficient goal seeking, and if, as I have also assumed, the goal of a purely cognitive being is a complete and accurate understanding of what is the case, then purely cognitive beings ought to do their best to achieve that goal. When we show that to some extent an action or belief helps achieve that end, to that extent we have proven it epistemically rational. When we show that to some extent an action or belief prevents us from reaching the cognitive goal, to that extent we have shown it irrational. Methods that help us achieve the cognitive end would be codified by what we may call \textit{principles of rational belief management} (what Harman would call a "rule of belief revision"\textsuperscript{12}).

It turns out that if the skeptic's negative principle is correct at all then it must itself be one of these belief management principles. Certainly it cannot be a principle or rule of implication or probabilification. Examples of such rules are modus ponens (p, and if p then q, taken together, imply q) and perhaps the following inductive rule: \textit{All of the many A's observed have been B's, together with Here is an A, probabilifies Here is a B}. Instead, the negative principle is supposed to spell out a policy that rational agents conform to in conducting their affairs. Certainly rational agents will be interested in rules of implication, since those rules help determine how to apply principles of belief management. But those rules do not tell us what we ought to do when confronted with the implications of our views. Suppose I believe \textit{Whenever I whistle, Spot shows up} and \textit{I whistled}. Suppose also that I look around and come to believe \textit{Spot has not shown up}. Modus ponens tells me that the first two beliefs imply that Spot has shown up, but that rule of implication does not itself tell me whether to believe \textit{Spot has shown up, Spot has not shown up, I did not whistle}, or \textit{Spot does not always show up when I whistle}. For this choice I need principles of rational belief management.

Given that the negative principle is offered as a belief management principle, we would assess it the same way we would assess any putative belief management principle: by ascertaining its utility from the standpoint of the cognitive goal. When we do we will find that the negative principle should be rejected as irrational.

In rejecting the negative principle, we will be following the example of Harman, who notes that if we had to abandon all of those beliefs with which we do not associate a justification, we would have to abandon most of them, since as a matter of psychological fact people can rarely keep track of the justifications by which they arrive at their views. (Nor would it help to say that the negative principle does not force us to abandon beliefs we can justify \textit{on the spot}; if we can rarely keep track of the justifications for our views, it is unlikely that we can provide very many of our thoughts with fresh justifications on the spur of the moment.) Harman rejects the negative principle on the grounds that this result is "absurd," and I agree that the result itself is so strikingly implausible that it constitutes grounds on which to reject the negative principle.\textsuperscript{13} But he was not discussing skepticism, and since some (including Harman himself) would say that
showing a view leads to skeptical results is itself a reductio ad absurdum, antiskeptics cannot rest much on avoiding absurdity. 

We can rest a great deal, however, on considerations about our goal as cognitive beings, which is an approach Harman did not take. Given the negative principle, we must do something even more drastic than drop beliefs whose justifications we have forgotten. Assuming that the ultimate bases for belief are arbitrary, as we have granted the skeptic, the negative principle would require us to stop believing anything. Yet an injunction against believing anything (or even one against believing very much) would obviously make it impossible to achieve the goal of arriving at a complete and accurate understanding of what is the case. The negative principle has turned out to be quite unattractive.14

Indeed, given that our ultimate beliefs are arbitrary, it is rational to adopt management principles that allow us to retain these fundamental yet arbitrary views, since the alternative is to simply give up on the attempt to achieve the epistemic goal. One policy for dealing with arbitrary beliefs that is far milder than the negative principle is given by the principle of positive undermining (the positive principle), according to which we should abandon a belief if we positively think that our reasons for believing it, if any, are misleading; that is, either the belief at hand is not justified and we are able to probabilify its negation, or we are convinced that our reasons for asserting to it involve indispensable false claims.15 Needless to say, if we have no reason to think something, then our reasons cannot be misleading, and the mere fact that we have not provided evidence for a view does not mean we have evidence against it. Indeed, it would be difficult to find convincing evidence against our most fundamental claims, simply because they are fundamental. So the milder principle would not automatically enjoin abandoning arbitrary beliefs. On the other hand, if we really had positive evidence against a view, or we saw that it rests on false assumptions, our cognitive goal would almost certainly be served by abandoning that view.

Obviously, the positive principle could not stand as the sole belief management principle. The epistemic goal motivates cognitive beings to adopt other principles. One additional management principle would instruct them to increase the coherence of their belief scheme (since they want to understand reality, and do so accurately). I take it that this vague principle implies the positive principle, so no tension exists between the two. Another management principle would direct cognitive beings to increase the scope of their belief scheme (since they want a complete picture of reality). This principle is in tension with the others, since it is sometimes possible to increase scope by knowingly adopting far-reaching beliefs that conflict with other beliefs and hence lower the overall coherence of one's scheme. When management principles conflict, cognitive beings must work out the best compromise they can.

At any rate, providing a complete set of management principles is beyond the scope of this essay. For our present purposes focusing on the positive principle is good enough, since in almost all cases our desire for a complete and accurate understanding is served by avoiding any claim based on misleading grounds, and since the positive principle avoids the difficulty that so thoroughly undermines the negative. And note that principles instructing us to increase the scope and coherence of our belief scheme no more force us to abandon fundamental yet arbitrary beliefs than does the positive principle. Even though our fundamental beliefs are arbitrary it is epistemically rational to
tolerate them through the application of something like the positive principle rather than to abandon them through the application of the negative.

SKEPTICISM AND THE POSITIVE PRINCIPLE

The loss of the negative principle bodes ill for the regress skeptic, who argues first that our ultimate beliefs are arbitrary and then uses the negative principle to show that we should abandon them and everything resting on them. Deprived of that principle, regress skeptics cannot complete their argument. Suppose they try to appeal to the positive principle instead. As we have already noted, the positive principle does not motivate us to revise our views just because their justification happens to be claims that are themselves arbitrary. So far as that principle is concerned, a justification that begins with an arbitrary view is a perfectly good justification. Hence the positive principle is useless to regress skeptics.

Rejecting the negative principle also stops the rule skeptic. For suppose we continue to blunt the impact of the arbitrariness thesis with the positive principle, saying that arbitrary beliefs are fine so long as there is no good reason to regard them as mistaken. To be sure, applying this principle involves the need to identify evidence so that we can tell when we have such overwhelming evidence against a belief that it must go. Since we identify evidence using rules of induction and deduction, we need these rules to apply the positive principle. Even if we grant rule skeptics that these rules are necessary, however, they still cannot complete their argument. They can claim that to defend rules of inductive or deductive logic we must take a set of conclusions for granted, while to defend conclusions we need to take the trustworthiness of rules of logic for granted, but this admission of the inevitability of an arbitrary starting point is no longer worrisome once we replace the negative principle with the positive.

It is instructive to connect together the elements of the case against rule skepticism in a slightly different way. Given our goal as cognitive beings, we want a complete and accurate understanding of reality. If the only ways to get started on that project are to arbitrarily adopt a set of claims or to arbitrarily accept the trustworthiness of a set of logical rules, then that is what we should do. From the standpoint of rationality, some picture (whether internally consistent or not) is necessarily better than none, for adopting no picture whatever guarantees that we will completely fail to meet our goal, and a picture adopted through initial moves that are themselves arbitrary is certainly more likely to be a closer approximation to a complete and accurate understanding of reality than no picture at all. Even a set of claims (such as 'There is a dollar on the table' and 'There is a pen one foot from my foot', etc.) each of which is false (since in fact the bill on the table is counterfeit, and the pen is thirteen inches from my foot, etc.), may contain a great deal of information about the world (as we said earlier). And inconsistent views may have individually accurate components that we can exploit without exploiting the contradictions themselves — that is, without going on to believe anything we like on the grounds that a contradiction 'entails' everything.

I have accepted the awkward claim that some beliefs we have no reason to think true are rational. This is awkward because people tend to define a 'justified' and a 'rational' belief as one we have reason to believe true. Most of the awkwardness can be
avoided, however, if we drop the regress skeptic's assumption that we are justified in thinking things only when we have reasons to think those things true. Let us accept the usual convention that a rational belief is the same thing as a justified belief, but let us understand a reason to be a consideration suggesting that a claim is true or that an action is one we ought to undertake. Then we may say that we are justified in believing things that are not based on reasons.

It is time to sum up. Since the negative principle would force us to give up all of our views, it prevents us from meeting the definitive goal of cognitive beings, namely a complete and accurate understanding of what is the case. A far better belief management principle, from the point of view of epistemic rationality, is the positive principle, according to which we ought to avoid consenting to claims when we think that our reasons for accepting them are misleading. Through this principle we may rationally believe claims that are fundamental yet arbitrary.\(^\text{16}\)

While defending the positive principle, and defusing skepticism, I have assumed that our ultimate beliefs are based on no reasons whatever. It is time to consider whether that strong assumption is plausible. I shall do so by asking whether foundationalists and coherenists, who hold the leading approaches to justification, manage to show that arbitrary beliefs are escapable. Needless to say, I cannot consider all of the many accounts of justification available, nor even all of the versions of foundationalism and coherenism. But I hope that my sketch of the main reasons foundationalists and coherenists cannot escape arbitrary beliefs can be extended to cover other approaches to justification, so that the arbitrariness thesis is at least rendered plausible.

THE ARBITRARINESS THESIS

The most familiar moves that have been offered to block the regress argument, at least in discussions of fact skepticism, are foundationalism and coherenism. Proponents of both approaches think it important to block the regress, and presumably that is because they think the skeptic is correct in saying that arbitrary beliefs should be avoided since such views are irrational. Contemporary philosophers who have endorsed the negative principle include Lawrence BonJour and Richard Foley.\(^\text{17}\) BonJour uses it in the course of justifying coherentism; Foley uses it while justifying foundationalism. Thus BonJour says

One's cognitive endeavors are epistemically justified only if and to the extent that they are aimed at [the truth], which means very roughly that one accepts all and only those beliefs which one has good reason to think are true. To accept a belief in the absence of such a reason... is to neglect the pursuit of truth; such acceptance is, one might say, epistemically irresponsible.\(^\text{18}\)

Aside from their agreement on the negative principle, however, foundationalism and coherenism overlap very little. The former says that justification begins with basic beliefs, that is, ones that are self-supporting (though not incorrigible) in the sense that having them makes it likely that they are true. The claim that some beliefs are basic is likely to lead foundationalists to deny the skeptic's assertion that all justification is inferential, but whether or not they reject the inferential conception of justification, foundationalists deal with skepticism by saying that some beliefs support themselves. Coherentists are far more likely to agree that all justification is inferential. Whereas
foundationalists say that basic beliefs support both themselves and everything else, coherentists say that each belief is paired to others in the scheme that support it, though none is foundational. On the coherence theorist's view, justification involves the whole of a big belief scheme: these schemes themselves are self-supporting, in that having them makes it likely that they are roughly correct.

The most obvious way to defend the arbitrariness thesis against foundationalists would be to reject their claim that all of our views rest on a foundation of basic beliefs. Instead, we could say, it makes no sense to say that our foundational views are self-supporting. Either they are simply arbitrary, or else they are not really basic and instead are justified on the basis of some picture of how we arrived at them. I shall not take this approach, however, even though I think it is correct. Instead, I shall adopt a simpler tactic. I want to give foundationalists their basic beliefs. Let us suppose that our beliefs really do rest on ones whose very presence ensures that they are probably true, so that they are self-justifying. With basic beliefs as a head start, can foundationalists hope to silence skeptics who say that arbitrary beliefs are unavoidable?

They cannot. They can bypass regress skepticism if we give them basic beliefs, but the baton is then passed, relay-style, to the rule skeptic. To be useful, basic beliefs must be our link to other claims about the world, for basic beliefs are highly restricted. I presume that an example of a basic belief would be a percept statement like 'I seem to see a flamingo now'. It takes a greater stretch of the imagination to call an observation statement like 'There is a flamingo now' self-justifying, but let us say it is. Our interest in percept statements is due to their utility toward getting us to other percept statements and to nonpercept statements, so that prediction, retrodiction and claims about the world become possible. And a good deal of our interest in observation statements is their utility toward getting us to theoretical statements, including 'Flamingos are tasty,' and 'The structure of all water molecules is the same.' If we think that there is such a thing as inductive logic, that is, a set of formal rules specifying when the premises of an argument probabilify its conclusion without entailing it, we might say that the link is made by these ampliative rules or principles of induction. If we doubt that there is such a logic, we must still grant that there is such a thing as inductive reasoning, which involves inferring a conclusion from premises that do not entail it. Accordingly, we might say that the link is the simple belief that given the nature of the world (and given, perhaps, the nature of our specific circumstances), the truth of one of the things we believe is a reliable indicator of the truth of another; for example, the truth of 'I seem to see a flamingo now' reliably indicates the truth of 'There is a flamingo now.'

Suppose we find ourselves skeptical about inductive logic, and admit only inductive reasoning. Nonetheless, as Hume would have pointed out, to take the truth of one claim as a reliable indicator of the truth of a second (not entailed by the first) is to take it for granted that ours is the sort of world in which the one sort of fact reliably indicates the other. Perhaps we can justify that claim about the world, but only if we take for granted other claims about the world. One way or another we take a great deal for granted.

Now suppose that we grant the existence of inductive logic. As Hume did point out, the only way we can justify one inductive logic over an alternative one is to take for granted some of the claims that may be justified only with the use of an inductive logic. Roughly, to justify an inductive logic involves arguing that it is truth-conducive. Given
our end as cognitive beings, we want it to be likely that our inductive logic will get us from accurate claims about aspects of the world to other accurate claims about the world, where the former do not entail the latter. To the extent that we have argued persuasively that our inductive logic is truth-conducive, to that extent we have justified it. However, the claim that our inductive logic is truth-conducive is itself a substantial claim about the world. As such, it can be justified only by taking for granted a substantial set of assumptions about the world, assumptions support for which it is the very purpose of our inductive logic to provide.

So either we take our inductive logic for granted, and use it to defend claims about the world, or else we take for granted a picture of the world that is substantial enough to provide grounds for thinking that our logic is truth-conducive. Either way, extensive arbitrariness is central to our belief scheme.

A way to resist this rule-skeptical defense of the arbitrariness thesis is to suggest that we can avoid taking either an inductive logic or world picture for granted since we can justify both through reaching what John Rawls has called a reflective equilibrium. One of the earliest descriptions of this mechanism was provided by Nelson Goodman in *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast.* Concerning deductive inference Goodman wrote:

> Rules and particular inferences alike are justified by being brought into agreement with each other.
> A rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend.21

He then extended his conclusion to inductive inference:

> An inductive inference, too, is justified by conformity to general rules, and a general rule by conformity to accepted inductive inferences.

What Goodman described is a process whereby a rather narrow equilibrium is reached between accepted inductive inferences like 'I have seen 99 thousand gophers living in holes and none who did not, so all gophers live in holes' and general rules like 'From: large numbers of observed $F$'s are $G$'s and no observed $F$'s are non-$G$'s, infer: all $F$'s are $G$'s.' However, a 'wider' equilibrium could be reached if we throw in other convictions of which we are confident, including claims about the world, like 'When I seem to see a gopher, usually one is really there.' I take it that this notion of reaching a wide reflective equilibrium is at the heart of the coherence theory of justification; the idea is that the initial confidence we have in some claims transfers over to other claims and to our rules of deductive and inductive logic, and vice versa.

I do not doubt that our confidence in a whole scheme of beliefs can be bolstered if we make mutual adjustments leading to a state of reflective equilibrium. Unfortunately, reaching reflective equilibrium does not eliminate the arbitrariness we underlined when discussing foundationalism. We certainly can pick out claims about the world and particular inductive inferences in which we feel confident and use them as a guideline for adjusting the rules of our inductive logic. We could even introduce a notion of arbitrariness-relative-to-such-and-such, and say that relative to our background assumptions about the world, our inductive rules are not arbitrary. But these moves still involve taking the background assumptions for granted. Similarly, if we swear by some
inductive logic, we can use it to adjust our inductive inferences and claims about the world, but we are still taking its truth– conduciveness for granted. To say that the arbitrariness vanishes if we make both kinds of adjustment — from rules to inferences and back again — is absurd. What happened is that the coherenstist takes one thing for granted at one time, then something else at another, depending on which element in our scheme of beliefs is under scrutiny. Indeed, this very point is admitted by coherenstists; as soon as they have explained that our belief scheme is analogous to Otto Neurath’s ship in that any part of it may be rebuilt but only while borne by other parts, they always acknowledge that circularity is involved, though they quickly add that the circularity is not vicious — whatever that means.22

Connecting issues up differently reveals another way to show that coherenstism does not eliminate the arbitrary elements in our scheme of beliefs. The coherenstist presumes that the practice of reaching reflective equilibrium helps ensure that a belief scheme is a complete and accurate understanding of reality. But why presume that? Here coherenstists are in the same sort of predicament as foundationalists. Coherenstists can use a world picture to defend the truth–conduciveness of reaching equilibrium, or they can simply take that truth–conduciveness for granted. Either way, extensive arbitrariness is inescapable.23

SKEPTICISM ABOUT GOALS

My discussion of theoretical skepticism has been based on the assumptions that rationality is, roughly, efficient goal pursuit, and that our goal as cognitive beings is a complete and accurate understanding of reality. But what’s to stop skeptics from raising doubts at a deeper level? Why not imagine a kind of skeptic who argues that our fundamental goals in general and the cognitive goal in particular are arbitrary in the sense that we have no reason to adopt or retain them, and so we ought not? Such goal skepticism, as I shall call it, would be a kind of practical skepticism. Goal skeptics say that when we have no reason to have some goal, no consideration suggesting that we ought to adopt or retain it, we should drop it. It is not unrelated to the theoretical skepticism we have already discussed, for on the assumption that we cannot drop all beliefs concerning what ought to be the case unless we also avoid seeking anything, radical theoretical skepticism would entail goal skepticism. Yet we have already refuted the theoretical skeptic’s negative principle; won’t the same strategy work against goal skepticism as well? Perhaps, but it is by no means clear.

Until now our response to skeptics has involved saying that to the extent that an action is useful toward our cognitive goal, to that extent it is epistemically rational; since even arbitrary beliefs are a crucial part of our effort to achieve our goal, yet the negative principle prevents us from retaining any of them, we ought not honor it. Applied to goal skepticism, this strategy would have us say that even if the cognitive end is arbitrary, having it plays a key role in our effort to achieve our goal as cognitive beings, so if a version of the negative principle forces us to abandon arbitrary goals, we ought instead to abandon that principle. The version of the negative principle used here by the goal skeptic, one that is more general than its predecessor (since believing things is only one kind of act), says that we ought to avoid doing anything arbitrarily, and that includes adopting or retaining goals. This strategy seems ineffective against goal skeptics. It
amounts to saying that we must have the cognitive goal if we expect to achieve the
cognitive goal, so any principle of goal revision that stops us must go. While that is
(trivially) true, it is useless, since the status of the cognitive goal is precisely what the
skeptical questions.

But wait. True, showing that we must have a goal if we expect to achieve it is
no reason to have that goal in the first place. But our response to the skeptic was not
intended to be a reason to adopt or retain the cognitive goal. We admitted that that goal
is arbitrary. What we were trying to show was that it is epistemically rational to retain
the cognitive goal in spite of its arbitrariness. For that purpose, it is effective to point
out that retaining our goal helps us achieve it, since by definition it is epistemically ra-
tional to do what serves the cognitive end. We have a response to goal skeptics after all.
Their argument against our cognitive goal was that it, like any other arbitrary goal,
should be abandoned. Our response is that the skeptic’s general negative principle —
ever act arbitrarily — interferes with our cognitive goal. From the standpoint of epis-
temic rationality, we would do well to prefer something more like a general positive
principle: never do what you have reason not to do. This principle does not inveigh
against having or adopting arbitrary goals. So the general negative principle and not our
arbitrary cognitive goal is what we should abandon.

Let me put my objection to the skeptic’s case against arbitrary goals differently.
The goal skeptic thinks that the arbitrariness of a goal suggests that that goal is not to be
valued. But why should the skeptic, of all people, assume that arbitrariness is of dis-
value rather than of value or neither? After skeptics find that our ultimate reason to want
or value what we do is arbitrary, why should they conclude their finding supports in-
difference or nihilism? Mustn’t skeptics admit that our ultimate reason to avoid or dis-
value what we do is arbitrary as well? So mustn’t they admit that ultimately we have no
reason not to continue to want and value the things we do, or even to create new desires,
values and projects for ourselves without pretending to have any reasons for doing so?

Our response to goal skeptics gave them much of the ground they claimed. It
involved admitting that the cognitive goal is arbitrary, so that rationality itself is in the
service of an arbitrary end. Perhaps we ought not admit any such thing. Why not at
least delay, by making fairly standard moves? I doubt that the cognitive goal is ultimate
for everyone. Whether it is ultimate for us or not, however, we might still try to deny
the arbitrariness of the cognitive goal by noting its instrumental value toward other ulti-
mate goals we have, such as surviving, or enjoying ourselves.

It little avails us to respond this way, however. One problem is that to do so is
to change the subject. We have been concerned with epistemic rationality, defined in
terms of fictional agents who efficiently pursue the cognitive end and who ignore all
others. To invoke other sorts of ends is to leave the context of the purely epistemic and
to enter the context of a more general sort of rationality, namely rationality as concerned
with all of our goals, not just the epistemic end. This broader sort would lead us to take
roughly the attitude that all of our goals ought to be achieved efficiently, though when
they conflict a compromise of some sort must be worked out either by eliminating a
suspect goal, or by designing our lives as best we can to fulfill even the goals that
conflict.

Changing the subject is, however, not much of a problem, given the extreme ar-
tificality of purely epistemic rationality. No one (except perhaps Schopenhauer\textsuperscript{24}) would
want to be the cold mirror of reality that a purely cognitive being aims to be. Even those of us for whom the cognitive end is an ultimate aim have other interests that compete for our attention and energies. Some of these lead us to regard many aspects of a complete and accurate picture of reality (perhaps most — how can we tell?) as trivial. No one, for example, should care how many blades of grass were growing on the White House lawn on August 1, 1981. So let us extend the scope of our discussion, and ask whether the arbitrariness thesis can be refuted from the standpoint of rationality in general.

Included in the more generous supply of goals might well be some that constitute reasons to pursue the cognitive end. But defending it this way only serves to delay the inevitable. The skeptic will only ask why we pursue those other goals. If (though we probably could not do this) we managed to show that our ultimate goals are mutually supporting, the skeptic will ask why we pursue our package of ultimate ends rather than some other. We might respond by suggesting that our cognitive goal or our package of ultimate ends are hard-wired in, so that we could not abandon them even if we wanted to. Yet the retort would be immediate: that does not make them any less arbitrary. Suppose we did have the ability to change our goals; suppose that through genetic engineering or with the potions of a clever chemist we could give ourselves any profile of ultimate desires we wanted to. The fact is that we have no reason to prefer one profile over another. Perhaps there are other gambits to delay the skeptic, but eventually we must agree that our ultimate goals are arbitrary.

A POSSIBLE PARADOX

I have assumed that in the theoretical sphere, a reason to believe something is a consideration suggesting that it is true. I argued that it is rational to believe some things even when we have no reason to think them true, and I did so by saying that something like the positive principle should feature prominently among the belief management principles. But if I defend the positive principle as I have, and say it is rational to hold a belief through the application of this principle, haven’t I given a reason to hold that belief? In arguing that the positive principle is better from the standpoint of the cognitive end than the alternative, so that it is rational to believe arbitrary claims endorsed by that principle, haven’t I given a consideration suggesting that we ought to believe those claims?

I have given a practical reason to adopt the positive principle, but I have given neither a practical nor a theoretical reason to believe particular arbitrary claims rather than others. The positive principle is indiscriminate among beliefs; it does not pick out particular ones and say we ought to believe them. So far as that principle is concerned, any of an unlimited range of beliefs will do just as well. Moreover, nothing I have said singles out one set of arbitrary beliefs as more useful than an unlimited range of others as a means for achieving the epistemic goal. Hence my argument that it is rational to believe fundamental arbitrary claims does not show that those claims are not arbitrary after all.
One final point. Even if we could show that one set of beliefs is more useful than any other as a means for achieving the epistemic goal, that would not show that our cognitive scheme is devoid of crucial arbitrary elements. For as we saw earlier, even the epistemic goal itself is arbitrary. However, since an arbitrary goal can still be a reason to act, we need not deplore our predicament in the way that existentialists did.26

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NOTES

1 He does so in Chapter 4 of his excellent book Change in View: Principles of Reasoning (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986). Harman's version of the negative principle is this (p. 39): One should stop believing P whenever one does not associate one's belief in P with an adequate justification (either intrinsic or extrinsic). Incidentally, Charles Peirce adopts something resembling the positive principle and rejects something resembling the negative in "The Fixation of Belief," reprinted in J. Buchler, ed., Philosophical Writings of Peirce (New York: Dover Publications, 1955); see especially "erroneous conception" number 2, p. 11.

2 Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Chapter 12.

3 One way to read Richard Rorty's Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) has it offer the Pyrrhonian advice that we ought to stop worrying about facts, about correctly mirroring the world.


5 As Burnyeat says on p. 119 (ibid.), Sextus defends exactly the proposition Hume challenged the Pyrrhonist to defend, the proposition that he should, can, and does give up his belief in response to the skeptical arguments . . .

6 Hume never ascribed to the Pyrrhonian skeptic the claim that we should abandon views when we realize they are unfounded. According to his interpretation, Pyrrhonians thought (or hoped) that we would drop unfounded views we identify. Here is the passage in which Hume lodged his complaint against Pyrrhonism: A Pyrrhonian cannot expect that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind . . . On the contrary, he must acknowledge . . .that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. . . . [People] must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them. (Enquiry, Sect. XII, 128; quoted by Burnyeat, ibid., p. 117). Nothing said here is inconsistent with the possibility that on Hume's reading (like mine) Sextus has (falsely) reported that juxtaposing the appearances is desirable since as a matter of fact it eliminates factual belief and thereby produces peace of mind.


8 For a discussion that does a good job of turning aside some recent silly interpretations of Hume's position on skepticism, see Robert Fogelin's book Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature (London: RKP, 1985).


1966), p. 15, where he suggests that each person must meet two "purely intellectual requirements": (1) he should try his best to bring it about that if that proposition is true then he believe it; and (2) he should try his best to bring it about that if that proposition is false then he not believe it." He also points out that in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1911), p. 17, William James had said that our "duty in the matter of opinion" is that "we must know the truth: and we must avoid error. . . ."

Incidentally, the talk, in these passages, about epistemic "duties" is preposterous unless it is figurative. Flouting one's duties makes one immoral. Not doing one's best to get the truth and to avoid the false makes one ignorant.


14 The restrictions Harman places on "tentative" and "full acceptance" of hypotheses seem to force him to say that it is always irrational to tentatively or fully accept arbitrary claims: "one needs a special positive reason to keep on accepting something as a working hypothesis" (op. cit., p. 47), "[to be justified in fully accepting P] it is not enough to look for positive evidence in favor of a hypothesis; one must also try to find evidence against the hypothesis." (p. 48) However (because of the positive principle discussed later), he would also say that once we do act irrationally and tentatively then fully accept an arbitrary claim it is rational to continue believing that arbitrary claim. Harman's restrictions are unacceptable given that fully accepting fundamental arbitrary claims is the means to achieving the cognitive goal.

15 A version of this principle, too, was named by Harman (op. cit.), Chapter 4. Harman's version is "One should stop believing P whenever one positively believes one's reasons for believing P are no good"

16 If successful, my argument against the negative principle obviously would also show that Barry Stroud and Michael Williams are mistaken in accepting a "conditional" form of skepticism. In his essay "Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism," *Mind* 47 (1988), p. 417, Williams states this version of skepticism as follows: "if we hand the sceptic his foundationalist presuppositions, there is no refuting him. . . ." For Stroud's version, see his book *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). As the next section of my essay will make clear, I would also reject Williams's claim that skepticism presupposes foundationalism (ibid., p. 418).

17 Foley:

For a proposition p to be genuinely uncontroversial for S . . . it is not enough for him to lack an argument for not-p. He must also have reasons in favor of p. For if S were to have no good reason to think that p is true (as well as no argument for not-p), withholding judgment on p would be his best option. (op. cit., p. 49)

I might add that in "Evidentialism" (*Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985)), Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, while defending a view called 'evidentialism', write

The paranoid person epistemically ought not believe that he is being spied upon when he has no evidence supporting this belief. We hold the general view that one epistemically ought to have the doxastic attitudes that fit one's evidence. We think that being epistemically obligatory is equivalent to being epistemically justified.


19 Nor are coherentialists and foundationalists the only epistemologists who adopt the skeptic's negative principle. Even reliabilists like Alvin Goldman do (as in his essay "What is Justified Belief?" *Justification and Knowledge* [Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979] 1–25), though in other ways they disagree quite fundamentally with coherentialists and with those foundationalists who say that only beliefs may justify beliefs. Reliabilists suggest that being justified is not merely a matter of having beliefs that support themselves or one another; instead, it is at least partly a matter of how we are related to the world. But while our relationship to the world sometimes ensures that our views are justified, beliefs still must be justified to be rational, and if they are not rational they should be abandoned.
20 (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), Chapter III.
21 Ibid., p. 64.
22 Neurath introduced his metaphor in "Protokollsatzes," Erkenntnis 3 (1932) 206.
23 BonJour would characterize the situation of the coherentist as follows: (a) if our knowledge of those metabeliefs of ours that (more or less) accurately detailed our first-level beliefs were unproblematic, so that we could detect how coherent they are, and if these first-level beliefs were coherent, then we could show that our first-level beliefs were not arbitrary. (b) However, we cannot know or justify ourselves in thinking that these metabeliefs are correct since the only possible style of justification for them is a coherence justification, and such a defense, extended to metabeliefs, is viciously circular. Our metabeliefs are arbitrary. We merely presume they are true; we make what BonJour calls the Doxastic Presumption. So (c) a very radical skepticism is in order (op. cit., p. 105). We cannot justifiably believe that we have a rough idea of what it is that we believe, and so we cannot justifiably believe anything at all. Given what BonJour says about epistemic irresponsibility—that is, given the negative principle—it follows that we ought to abandon all of our beliefs. However, BonJour never draws this consequence, and instead suggests that we investigate what we could justify if we had unproblematic access to our metabeliefs. Unfortunately, BonJour's point about skepticism is buried in his book; it comes in the space of a couple of paragraphs on p. 105, where BonJour's discussion could be clearer. Occasionally he has been misinterpreted (e.g., by Anthony Brueckner, Philosophical Studies 54 (1988) 153–160); he does not intend to imply that the Doxastic Presumption allows us to bypass skepticism when he says that once we make that presumption we can go on to show that our commonsense beliefs are probably true.
24 "Knowledge...can...throw off its yoke, and, free from all the aims of the will, exist purely for itself, simply as a clear mirror of the world... If this kind of knowledge reacts on the will, it can bring about...resignation. This is the ultimate goal, and indeed the innermost nature of all virtue and holiness, and is salvation from the world." The World as Will and Representation, Vol. I, E. F. J. Payne, trans. (Indian Hills: The Falcon's Wing Press, 1958), Sect. 27, p. 152.
25 In his useful essay "Reflective Equilibrium, Analytic Epistemology and the Problem of Cognitive Diversity," Synthese 74 (1988) 391, Stephen Stich argues that we ought to reject the analytic epistemologist's proposal "to arbitrate between competing [criteria for evaluating cognitive processes] by seeing which one accords best with the evaluative notions 'embraced by everyday thought and language'" (p. 409). Stich's thesis supports my own since it defeats one possible type of argument for the claim that the epistemic goal is not arbitrary. Moreover, I agree that the analytic epistemologist's methodology is misleading if taken to provide critique-proof criteria for evaluation. After all, commonsense evaluative notions are themselves subject to evaluation. Still, devising clear accounts of the commonsense evaluative notions is useful if we want to work out a sharp picture of the conception of rationality approximating the one we actually hold. Nothing stops us from then criticizing it, or simply embracing it while recognizing its arbitrariness. (Stich's thesis is anticipated by various authors including Wesley Salmon and Brian Skyrms; see his acknowledgements in his note 29.
26 This essay of a colloquium at the University of Texas at Austin, December 2, 1988. I thank the members of the philosophy department there for their advice and criticism. I also thank Jonathan Vogel and Curtis Brown for helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.