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The Civic Virtues of Skepticism, Intellectual Humility, and Intellectual Criticism

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For the Ancient Pyrrhonians, “skepticism” was a name for something thoroughly practical – it was a name for a way of life, consisting of the maintenance of suspension of judgment, which was meant to lead to tranquility. For contemporary epistemologists, however, “skepticism” is a name for something thoroughly theoretical – it is a name for a hypothetical view, which no one actually holds, on which no one knows anything. For the Pyrrhonians, skepticism was a path that you might choose to follow; for contemporary epistemologists, skepticism is at best a paradox, and at worst absurd.¹ Between these two extremes lies an Early Modern understanding of “skepticism” as a name for something both practical and theoretical. The skeptic, on this understanding, is a valuable member of liberal democratic society in virtue of (among other things) her disposition to attribute ignorance, both to herself and to other people. Here I’ll articulate and defend the idea that skepticism, so understood, is a civic virtue, drawing on David Hume’s discussion of mitigated skepticism in the closing section of his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), and I’ll articulate a proposal for how to educate for skepticism, based on Benjamin Franklin’s discussion of intellectual humility in his *Autobiography* (1790).

1 Skepticism as a character trait

In the final section of the *Enquiry*, Hume distinguishes between three species of skepticism. The first is:

a species of skepticism, *antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgment[, which] recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties. (§XII, p. 149)²

At least “when more moderate” (p. 150), Hume approves of this kind of skepticism, but suggests that the universal doubt described is not possible for actual human beings. Note well that skepticism, on this understanding, is something like a stance or attitude – “an universal doubt” about all opinions, principles, and faculties.

The second species of skepticism Hume considers is a:

species of skepticism, *consequent* to science and enquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered, either the

¹ An exception here is Pierre Le Morvan’s (2011) instructive discussion of “healthy skepticism.”

² Page references to the *Enquiry* are from Hume 1975.

absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed. (p. 150)

After a lengthy discussion of the arguments for this kind of skepticism (pp. 151-8), Hume reminds us one of the central ideas of his *Enquiry*:

[T]he great subverter of *Pyrrhonism* or the excessive principles of scepticism is action, and employment. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools ... [b]ut as soon as they leave the shade, and by the presence of the real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined skeptic in the same condition as other mortals. (p. 159)

Moreover, Hume argues, “no durable good can ever result from ... *excessive* scepticism” (ibid.); such skepticism would not be “beneficial to society.” (p. 160) So the Cartesian species of skepticism, though useful, is merely hypothetical, and the Pyrrhonian species is both useless and impossible to sustain.

There is a third species of skepticism, however, which Hume calls “a more *mitigated* scepticism or *academical* philosophy.” (p. 161) This, he argues, “may be both durable and useful” (ibid.) and “may be of advantage to mankind.” (p. 162) Hume goes on to discuss two distinct sub-species of mitigated skepticism. The second sub-species is what we would call empiricism, which leads to “the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding.” (Ibid.) This results in a negative outlook for “Divinity or Theology” and “[m]orals and criticism,” and in Hume’s famous rejection of metaphysics as “sophistry and illusion.” (p. 165) The first sub-species has more in common with what we would call skepticism. Hume writes that:

The greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions; and while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitously into the principle, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments. [...] But could such dogmatical reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding ... such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against their antagonists. [...] [A] small tincture of *Pyrrhonism* might abate their pride, by showing them, that the few advantages, which they may have attained over their fellows, are but inconsiderable, if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature. (p. 161)

The “small tincture of Pyrrhonism,” that Hume here recommends, contrasts with the “excessive” Pyrrhonism that was dismissed as both useless and impossible to sustain. Mitigated skepticism – which requires, or amounts to, an awareness of “the strange infirmities of human understanding” – prevents dogmatism, inspires modesty, and undermines prejudice against one’s interlocutors. As David Fate Norton (2002) puts it, Hume recommends philosophical doubt, where “doubt” does not mean suspension of judgment (as on Cartesian skepticism), but rather a certain “cognitive activity or philosophical method.” (p. 384) We are to doubt our beliefs, that is “we are to attend to the counter-evidence and counter-arguments; we are to avoid precipitate decisions on the issues before us; we are to take note of the inherent limitations of our faculties.” (ibid.) All this, Hume suggests, can be both “durable and useful” – that is to say, it is humanly possible for people to doubt their beliefs in this way, and such doubt is valuable or beneficial.

I’ll return to the idea that skepticism is valuable or beneficial, below (§4). What I would like to take away from Hume’s discussion, in the first instance, is the idea of skepticism as a character trait. Both Cartesian skepticism and Pyrrhonian skepticism, as Hume understands them, are best understood as doxastic attitudes – either as (for example) the belief that knowledge is impossible or as (for example) suspension of judgment about all empirical propositions. But what Hume calls mitigated skepticism is best understood as a character trait – in other words, as an integrated set of dispositions to act, think, and feel. To be fair, Hume describes skepticism as flowing from an awareness of “the strange infirmities of human understanding.” But, for our purposes here, we should take note of the fact that the skeptic is described in explicitly characterological terms.

“Skepticism,” “skeptic,” and “skeptical” have characterological meanings in ordinary English. So the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives one sense of “skepticism” as “[a] disposition to doubt or incredulity in general; mistrustfulness; sceptical temper,” with a “skeptic” thus “one who is habitually inclined rather to doubt than to believe any assertion or apparent fact that comes before him; a person of sceptical temper.” This jibes with how Hume begins his essay on “The Sceptic” (1742): “I have long entertained a suspicion with regard to the decisions of philosophers upon all subjects, and found in myself a greater inclination to dispute than to assent to their conclusions.” (p. 95) This sense of “skeptic” is obviously related to the sense of “skeptic” relevant to what Hume calls mitigated skepticism. But this sense also has connotations of suspension of judgment.³ These ordinary meanings of “skepticism,” “skeptic,” and “skeptical” are important, although quite different from their philosophical senses, especially in connection with the view that knowledge is impossible.

³ This sense of “skeptic” is related to its sense when it appears in the title of the magazine called *The Skeptic*, which takes “a sceptical look at pseudoscience and claims of the paranormal,” (<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/about>) and in the names of numerous societies of self-described skeptics, such as the Edinburgh Skeptics, who are devoted to “science, reason, and critical thinking in Edinburgh.” (<http://www.edinburghskeptics.co.uk/about/>)

2 Civic virtue as a species of virtue

I assume that **virtues** are, roughly, character traits that are either admirable or desirable, by which I mean that to say that a character trait is a virtue is to express either an admiration for those who have said trait (in virtue of their having it) *or* a desire to have said trait.

Perhaps virtues are more than mere character traits: perhaps the virtuous person must be responsible for having the virtues that she has; perhaps the virtuous person must be intelligent in manifestations of virtue. These issues won't matter for our purposes here.

So much for the notion of a virtue; what then is a **civic virtue**? The expression "civic virtue" is ambiguous.⁴ It could be used to refer to something that is both a virtue and (in a sense that would need to be articulated) civic; call this a **predicative disambiguation** of "civic virtue." Or it could be used to refer to something that is a virtue in some civic sense of "virtue" (that would need to be articulated); call this an **attributive disambiguation** of "civic virtue." The difference between these can be drawn out with a silly example. "Burglaic" means "of or concerning burglary." What then is a "burglaic virtue"? On a predicative disambiguation of "burglaic virtue," this refers to something that is both burglaic and a virtue – a disposition to steal from the rich and give to the poor, for example. Or, on an attributive disambiguation of "burglaic virtue," this refers to something that is a virtue in a burglaic sense of "virtue" – an ability to pick locks, for example. A burglaic virtue, on the predicative disambiguation, is a virtue, simpliciter, that essentially belongs to the domain of burglary, while a burglaic virtue, on the attributive disambiguation, may or may not be a virtue, simpliciter, but is a "virtue relative to the aims of burglary." In this same way, a civic virtue, on a predicative disambiguation, is a virtue, simpliciter, that essentially belongs to the civic domain (which would need to be articulated), while a civic virtue, on an attributive disambiguation, may or may not be a virtue, simpliciter, but is a virtue in a civic sense of "virtue" (which would need to be articulated).

Here we shall employ a predicative disambiguation of "civic virtue." This requires us to say what it means for a virtue to be "civic" – or, as suggested above, to say what it means for a virtue to essentially belong to the "civic domain." I'll understand this as the domain of activity characteristic of citizenship – in liberal democratic societies, this comprises voting in free elections that are preceded by a period of campaigning and public debate, both formal and informal, as well as engaging with public policy in non-electoral ways (protesting, communicating with elected representatives, serving on juries). Essential aspects of the civic domain, in liberal democratic societies, and crucial for our purposes here, are both (i) the articulation and defense of your own opinions and arguments and (ii) critical engagement with the opinions and arguments of others. So, on the present conception of civic virtue, any virtue that essentially impacts on these activities will count as a civic virtue.

⁴ Cf. Geach 1956.

3 Skepticism, intellectual humility, and intellectual criticism

If you think x is a virtue (§2), and you want to define x , there are two approaches you can use. On a **description-first approach**, you define x by describing a particular character trait, and must then argue that x is admirable or desirable. Given your definition, $\langle x \rangle$ is a **trait term**, and your substantive task is to show that the trait picked out by $\langle x \rangle$ is admirable or desirable. On a **prescription-first approach**, you define x in prescriptive terms, building the appeal of x into its definition, and must then provide a description of which trait x is. Given your definition, $\langle x \rangle$ is a **virtue term**, and your substantive task is to say which trait is picked out by $\langle x \rangle$. An example will clarify what I mean here. On a description-first approach to courage, you could define courage as a character trait consisting of a disposition to expose yourself to personal risk – we could call this the trait of courage – and your task would then be to argue that courage, so understood, is valuable. By contrast, on a prescription-first approach to courage, you could define courage as excellence in exposing yourself to personal risk (cf. §2), and your task would then be to say something about the right time and the right way to expose yourself to personal risk. Here I shall employ a prescription-first approach to skepticism.

I'll assume that the virtues are **excellences** in Φ ing, i.e. dispositions to Φ at the right time and in the right way.⁵ The expression $\langle \text{excellence in } \Phi \text{ing} \rangle$ could alternatively be used to refer to the trait possessed by those who are good at Φ ing. Consider “excellence in torturing,” which could be used to refer to a the trait possessed by those who torture at the right time and in the right way (i.e. those who rarely if ever torture, etc.), but also to refer to the trait possessed by those who are good at torturing (i.e. those who are particularly brutal and violent, etc.). This examples shows that being good at Φ ing does not, in general, amount to a virtue.

What does it mean to Φ **at the right time and in the right way**? Although you might be happy to treat the notions of “the right time” and “the right way” as primitives, it is natural to understand these notions in teleological terms, such that the value of the virtues is derivative on the value of some aim. (Examples: you might think the virtues are appealing because they tend to cause something good; you might think the virtues are appealing because they constitute something good; or you might think that the virtues are appealing because they are constituted by the love of something good.) What is the aim of the virtues? You might treat the aim of the virtues as the happiness or eudaimonia of the possessor (and conclude, for example, that the virtues must benefit their possessor); or you might treat the aim of the virtues as the happiness or eudaimonia of people in general (and conclude, for example, that virtues must be either pleasing or useful). Here I shall treat the aim of the virtues as what is good, all things considered – which (we may assume) includes the happiness or eudaimonia of the possessor, as well as that of people in general, among other valuable things.

⁵ Individual virtues can thus be associated with characteristic activities – for each virtue, there is some Φ such that said virtue is excellence in Φ ing.

Here, then, is the definition of skepticism that I have in mind:

Skepticism is excellence in attributing ignorance (e.g. saying or thinking that someone does not know that p), withholding attributing knowledge (e.g. suspending judgment about whether someone knows that p; or expressing such suspension), and questioning whether people know (e.g. asking whether or how they know that p).

“Ignorance” here just means the lack of knowledge (it can mean something narrower in ordinary English), and “questioning whether people know” should be understood broadly, so as to include requests for evidence and challenges to the validity of arguments. For short, let’s use **being skeptical** to refer to attributing ignorance, withholding attributing knowledge, and questioning whether people know. Being skeptical, as suggested, includes both instances of private thought (e.g. thinking that you do not know) and instances of public expression (e.g. asking someone how she knows). In any event, skepticism is, for short, excellence in being skeptical.⁶

I shall treat intellectual humility as a part or aspect of skepticism:

Intellectual humility is excellence in attributing ignorance to yourself, withholding attributing knowledge to yourself, and questioning whether you know.

And we can likewise isolate that part of aspect of skepticism having to do with other people:

Intellectual criticism is excellence in attributing ignorance to other people, withholding attributing knowledge to other people, and questioning whether other people know.

Given our understanding of the notion of a virtue (§2), intellectual humility and intellectual criticism, so understood, are virtues. Being intellectually humble is a matter of being skeptical with respect to yourself, while being intellectually critical is a matter of being skeptical with respect to other people.⁷

You might understand “intellectual humility” so that intellectual humility has important connections to deference. On such an understanding, it is important to acknowledge our own fallibility, so that we can appreciate our inferiority relative to other, more reliable, thinkers. However, intellectual humility, when understood as a part or aspect of skepticism, is not plausibly connected in any notable way with deference – it is not more connected to deference than to non-deference. For the skeptical person, and therefore the

⁶ Cf. Le Morvan 2011, §VI.

⁷ These two “parts” are not wholly distinct. Consider the difference between an attribution of ignorance on the part of someone who generally takes herself to know and an attribution of ignorance on the part of someone who generally takes herself to be ignorant.

intellectually humble person, will be just as ready to attribute ignorance to other people as to herself (cf. §4.3, §5.5).

My definitions of skepticism, intellectual humility, and intellectual criticism focus on knowledge, at the expense of other epistemic statuses. Some accounts of intellectual humility suggest a broader focus.⁸ You might think that intellectual humility is manifested, for example, by acknowledgement of your intellectual vices. However, nothing will hinge on the narrow focus on knowledge – what I have to say about skepticism would apply even given a broader conception (although more would also need to be said).

Given these definitions, skepticism – including intellectual humility and intellectual criticism – is a civic virtue. Something is a civic virtue if it is both a virtue and civic (§2). That skepticism is a virtue is a trivial consequence of its definition here. So is skepticism civic? Recall that (i) the articulation and defense of your own opinions and arguments and (ii) critical engagement with the opinions and arguments of others are both essential elements of the civic domain (§2). Your dispositions to attribute ignorance, to withhold attributing knowledge, and to question whether people know will obviously have a big impact on these activities – and so we should count skepticism as a civic virtue.

4 When is it good to be skeptical?

Having employed a prescription-first approach to defining skepticism (§3), we must now say something about the right time and the right way to be skeptical. I shall approach this question by discussing the benefits and costs of being skeptical. A more comprehensive survey of these benefits and costs is beyond the scope of this paper, so our discussion will necessarily be narrow. I'll articulate three benefits of being skeptical (§§4.1 – 4.3), enumerate some of the costs of being skeptical (§4.4), and conclude by returning to our question about the right time and the right way to be skeptical (§4.5).

4.1 Being skeptical and inquiry

It is sometimes said that knowledge is the aim of inquiry. On one illuminating formulation of this idea, an essential function of knowledge attributions is to signal the end of inquiry.⁹ It's important to get clear on the truth in this idea, as there are some falsehoods in the neighborhood. It's not the case that someone who attributes knowledge to herself always (so long as she is reasonable) ceases to inquire: someone might be aware that she knows that *p*, and nevertheless inquire about whether *q*. Moreover, knowledge can be a precondition for inquiry (e.g. you can't coherently inquire about the properties of the Higgs boson unless you know a lot of physics already), a means to the end of conducting inquiry (e.g. your knowledge of how microscopes work allows you to study cell anatomy), and a cause of curiosity (e.g. knowing that Brazil won two of the last five football World Cups makes you wonder how many they have won in total). Finally, recognized knowledge that *p* does not preclude reasonable inquiry about why *p* – indeed, such knowledge seems like

⁸ Cf. Hazlett 2013.

⁹ See Kelp 2011, Rysiew 2012.

both a precondition for such inquiry, as well as one of its common causes (e.g. knowledge that fire is hot makes you wonder why fire is hot).

The truth to the idea that knowledge is the aim of inquiry is (at least) that someone who attributes knowledge that p to herself always (so long as she is reasonable) ceases to inquire about whether p.¹⁰ It is irrational to think that you know that p, and yet to continue inquiring about whether p.¹¹

The person who does not attribute knowledge that p, either to herself or to other people, will be able to reasonably inquire about whether p. Consider someone who believes, but not does not take herself to know, that p. Such a person will be able to critically scrutinize her own opinion, and in the course of this inquiry she may discover, and be able to articulate, reasons and arguments for her view. As well, she will be able to critically scrutinize the opinions of those who disagree with her, and in the course of this inquiry she will discover, and be able to articulate, reasons and arguments for their views. The attribution of knowledge, either to yourself or to other people, stands in the way of being a critical interlocutor, i.e. one who will seek out reasons and arguments on both sides of a dispute.¹²

By contrast, consider a familiar sort of intellectual stagnation, which manifests itself paradigmatically in political disagreement, and which plagues liberal democracies. Someone makes a controversial political claim; her opponents dispute the claim – and that is where the conversation ends. Further inquiry does not occur; the two parties do not critically scrutinize their positions, either individually or as a group; reasons and arguments remain unarticulated. Intellectual stagnation of this kind is bad for liberal democracies, which thrive on the articulation of reasons and arguments for a diverse set of positions. I propose to diagnose a source of such intellectual

¹⁰ “At least” this? That knowledge is the aim of inquiry requires more, e.g. that only knowledge (that p) satisfies or fulfills the internal or constitutive aim of inquiry (about whether p).

¹¹ This is true only given a somewhat artificial sense of “inquiry.” You can know that p and reasonably seek evidence and arguments relevant to whether p – think of a detective who has conclusive but inadmissible evidence about the guilt of a suspect and who is thus tasked with finding admissible evidence relevant to whether said suspect is guilty, or a widget inspector who must as a matter of procedure formally inspect every 100th widget off the line for flaws, even if she knows that said widget is not flawed. In the present sense, the detective and the widget inspector are not inquiring, strictly speaking, when they engage in their respective searches for evidence. Similarly, someone who takes herself to know that p, but who seeks additional evidence that p so as to acquire justified certainty that p, is not inquiring about whether p, in the present sense. (We might say that she is inquiring about whether it is certain that p.)

¹² The view that knowledge is the aim of inquiry stands in tension with some articulations of fallibilism, in as much as these suggest the coherence of knowing that p while continuing to inquire about whether p. However, not all articulations of fallibilism suggest this, e.g. the view that it is possible to know on the basis of evidence that doesn’t entail the truth of the proposition known.

stagnation by appeal to the stultifying effects on inquiry of the self-attribution of knowledge. In the case of stagnant disagreement, just described, the first party takes herself to know, and the second party takes herself to know, and as a result both take inquiry to be completed.

Such intellectual stagnation is bad for liberal democratic societies. My contention here is that the attribution of knowledge is a source of intellectual stagnation, in virtue of the fact that knowledge is the aim of inquiry. Being skeptical – attributing ignorance, withholding attributions of knowledge, and questioning whether people know – is therefore valuable in as much as it can function as an antidote to intellectual stagnation.

4.2 Being skeptical and disagreement

Being skeptical has additional implications when it comes to disagreement. Attributing knowledge to yourself precludes reasonably attributing knowledge to disagreeing interlocutors – you can't coherently think that you know that p and that someone else knows that $\sim p$. Thus, attributing knowledge to yourself ensures that you perceive a favorable disparity between yourself and disagreeing interlocutors. This kind of disparity enables us to dismiss our interlocutors' opinions and arguments, and often grounds a familiar sort of political entrenchment, in which disputants, taking themselves to know, dismiss each other as unreasonable – as Wittgenstein (1969) describes such situations in, “each man declares the other a fool and a heretic.” (§611) Avoiding this kind of entrenchment is valuable in liberal democratic societies. Being skeptical – and in particular not attributing knowledge to yourself – is therefore valuable in as much as it can prevent political entrenchment. When disputants take themselves to know, entrenchment may ensue, whereas when disputants take themselves to be ignorant, or suspend judgment about whether they know, respectful engagement may be possible.

However, attributing knowledge to others also ensures the appearance of disparity between yourself and disagreeing interlocutors: one that mandates capitulation in favor of the other party's position. When a would-be disputant takes her interlocutors to possess knowledge, she ought adopt their view. In this way, attributing knowledge to others can result in deference, which also precludes continued discussion and dialogue (cf. §4.3).

Finally, being skeptical is conducive to compromise. If you take yourself to know that your position is right, and your interlocutor takes herself to know that her position is right, there is little hope that you will be able to achieve unanimity in your thinking about the present issue, for example, by articulating a third position that incorporates insights of both your and your interlocutor's original views. The possibility of such compromise is valuable in liberal democratic societies, in as much as it provides a resolution of practical conflict, and being skeptical is valuable in as much as it is conducive to such compromise.

4.3 Being skeptical and the space of public reasons

Finally, being skeptical can serve the important function, in liberal democratic societies, of challenging other people's assertions. The attribution of

knowledge to other people can amount to deference, and deference about controversial matters, especially moral or political matters, has traditionally been viewed by political liberals as problematic.¹³

One worry about deference in politics is that unchallenged false assertions can become familiar rumors, before ossifying into common knowledge. Another, which I want to highlight here, is that the existence of a space of public reasons, as opposed to a traditional body of doctrine, depends on political assertions being regularly and systematically challenged. Among the dialectical aspects of being skeptical are such challenges, in the form of linguistic attributions of ignorance (e.g. “You don’t know that”), linguistic withholding of knowledge attribution (e.g. “It’s unclear whether you know that”), and linguistic questioning about whether people know (e.g. “How do you know?”). Unchallenged assertions, whether true or false, cannot give rise to opinions that are grounded in public reasons. Liberal democratic intellectual life thrives only when ignorance is assumed and common knowledge must be earned through critical and open debate. Being skeptical is therefore valuable in as much as it is essential for sustaining the existence of a space of public reasons.

4.4 The costs of being skeptical

I’ve described three ways in which being skeptical can be valuable in liberal democratic societies (§4.1 – 4.3). Here I’ll briefly describe four costs of being skeptical.

First, being skeptical can simply be dangerous. Those who speak truth to power often suffer for it; those who challenge the assertions of the powerful sometimes meet the same fate. Less drastically, intellectual humility is often less profitable than dogmatism. Someone who claims to know how to cure cancer may be able to sell more medicine than someone who claims merely to have a reasonable belief about how to cure cancer. And in academic life, confidence and bluster have the advantage over caution and understatement.

Second, being skeptical can be bad vis-à-vis the acquisition of knowledge. Suppose a reliable authority says that *p*. Challenging her, so that she must articulate reasons and arguments in defense of the proposition that *p*, might be good for the purposes of public reason, but you might have had knowledge that *p* from the outset, if you had just deferred to her authority.

Third, being skeptical can harm members of marginalized groups, in particular when their claims to knowledge have been systematically ignored. The ideal of public reason requires the articulation of reasons and arguments, but members of marginalized groups can occupy a standpoint from which certain truths can be appreciated, even if reasons and arguments in their defense cannot be articulated. It might be empowering for someone in such a position to attribute knowledge to herself, and equally important for others to attribute knowledge to her.

¹³ See especially Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?”; cf. Hills 2009, Howell 2014.

Fourth, being skeptical can give succor to conspiracy theorists, such as those who profess to doubt or deny that climate change is caused by humans. Consider the proposition that recent increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide are responsible for recent increases in the severity of hurricanes. Some scientists and many journalists are inclined to assert this proposition, even though it is scientifically controversial, such that a convincing argument in its defense has not yet been articulated. However, challenging this assertion – demanding that better arguments for it be produced; critically evaluating arguments offered for it – will aid and abet those who doubt or deny that climate change is caused by humans.

4.5 When to be skeptical

Recall the assumption that virtues are excellences (§2). The skeptic is not someone who attributes ignorance, withholds attributing knowledge, and questions whether people know, *no matter what* – she is someone who does these things at the right time and in the right way. Given our understanding of the right time and the right way (§2), the skeptic is someone who is sensitive to the good, all things considered, in her dispositions to be skeptical. She is someone who is disposed to be skeptical when it is good, all things considered (and in a way that is good, all things considered). You might then wonder: when, exactly, is it good, all things considered, to be skeptical?

Given that a plurality of values are relevant to this question – a few of which I've been able to mention here (§§4.1 – 4.4) – it is unlikely that we can say anything simple and decisive in answer to this question. To posit necessary and sufficient conditions for the all-things-considered goodness of being skeptical would provide us with an appealing principle to which we might appeal in practical reasoning. But the complexity of the evaluative landscape makes problematic the formulation of such a principle. We can, however, make a few generalizations on the basis of our discussion so far. First, it is generally good to be skeptical when it is good for public discourse – when it can prevent intellectual stagnation, for example, or when it can prompt the articulation of public reasons. Second, it is generally bad to be skeptical when doing so threatens to silence members of marginalized groups. Third, it is generally bad to be skeptical when doing so leads to the flourishing of conspiracy theories. Finally, it is generally bad to be skeptical when it will cost you a great deal. In any particular case, however, the wise person will take stock of the benefits and costs of being skeptical, and proceed accordingly. Imagine that the popular and powerful Dean of the Faculty, who will decide whether you receive a lucrative promotion, accuses certain critics of her crackpot research, which challenges the extent of the Nazi Holocaust, of homophobia. Should you publicly challenge the Dean's assertions? Answering this question would require a complex weighing of the benefits and costs of such a challenge. Possessing the virtue of skepticism, in this case, would dispose you to publicly challenge the Dean if and only if it would be good, all things considered, to do so.

5 Objections and replies

This section considers some objections to my defense of skepticism and intellectual humility as civic virtues.

5.1 Knowledge as the norm of belief

You might object that the self-attribution of ignorance (cf. §§4.1 – 4.2) rationally requires suspension of judgment, on the grounds that you ought not believe that *p* unless you know that *p*. This, along with some natural assumptions, yields the conclusion that you ought to suspend judgment about whether *p* if you think that you do not know that *p*. If this argument is sound, Hume’s useful mitigated skepticism collapses into excessive Pyrrhonian skepticism, and my account of the value of being skeptical (§§4.1 – 4.2) is problematic. For that defense relied on a picture of liberal intellectual life on which citizens have opinions – opinions that they articulate and defend in a community of critical and respectful interlocutors.

However, it is false that you ought to suspend judgment about whether *p* if you think that you do not know whether *p*. The false premise in the present argument is the premise that you ought not believe that *p* unless you know that *p*. This premise has little intuitive appeal, since it is easy to imagine cases in which someone permissibly believes that *p* but does not know that *p*. Substantial but inconclusive evidence might point towards some conclusion, for example, making it permissible to believe that conclusion, but since the evidence is inconclusive, such a belief would not amount to knowledge. Captain Jack Aubrey might have good reason to think that the French will attack at noon – they have always attacked a noon before; noon is the best time for them to attack; etc. – without knowing that they will attack at noon.¹⁴ And this also provides a counterexample to the idea that you ought to suspend judgment about whether *p* if you think that you do not know whether *p*, since it is easy to imagine that Aubrey knows that he does not know that the French will attack at noon.¹⁵

You might therefore defend the premise that you ought to believe that *p* only if you know that *p* by appeal to the supposed incoherence of saying or thinking something of the form $\langle p, \text{ but I don't know that } p \rangle$.¹⁶ However, the evidence for this supposed incoherence is unclear. Suppose Aubrey were to say, “The French will attack at noon, but since we do not know that they will attack at noon, we must remain vigilant until then.” If this is not incoherent – and it does not seem obviously or even *prima facie* incoherent – then the present argument is unsound. (Saying or thinking something of the form $\langle p, \text{ but I don't know that } p \rangle$ is sometimes described as a form of “Moore’s paradox.” G.E. Moore’s own treatment of such cases – which is relatively brief, by contrast with more substantial discussions of $\langle p, \text{ but I don't believe that } p \rangle$ – suggests that saying or thinking something of the form $\langle p, \text{ but I don't know$

¹⁴ The case is from Weiner 2005.

¹⁵ Note that the plausibility of this kind of case doesn’t depend on the fact that Aubrey’s belief concerns the future; we could just as well have told a story in which he believes that the French are not in the area or that the French did not take on munitions, etc.

¹⁶ See Huemer 2011, Feldman 2005, Gibbons 2013, Chapter 8.

that $p >$ is not always incoherent. Moore argues that asserting that p at least sometimes *implies* that you know that p .¹⁷ But implications can sometimes be cancelled – which is what Aubrey does in the present example.¹⁸)

All this suggests the possibility of reasonable belief that does not amount to knowledge. Countenancing such a possibility is what makes Hume’s useful skepticism *mitigated* – by contrast with the more extreme view that reasonable belief is impossible. In this connection, we can contrast the self-attribution of reasonable belief and the self-attribution of knowledge (cf. §4.1 – 4.2). First, reasonable belief, unlike knowledge, does not rationally require the cessation of inquiry. It is possible to reasonably believe something tentatively, without certainty, so that reasonable inquiry about the truth of said belief is still possible. Second, it is coherent to attributive reasonable belief, but not knowledge, to your disagreeing interlocutors.¹⁹ Parties to a dispute can coherently attribute reasonable belief to each other, allowing for a kind of mutually recognized parity, which itself allows for a kind of mutual understanding, in which they are able to explain the reasonableness of each other’s positions. Third, the self-attribution of reasonable belief, unlike the self-attribution of knowledge, is not counter-conducive to compromise. Consider cases of mutually recognized reasonable disagreement – the recognition of the reasonableness of an interlocutor’s position can, in some cases, provide you with a reason to seek out a compromise position that would be reasonable for both you and your interlocutor to accept.

5.2 Knowledge as the norm of practical reasoning

You might object that the self-attribution of ignorance (cf. §§4.1 – 4.2) would interfere with your ability to act rationally, on the grounds that you ought not use the premise that p in practical reasoning unless you know that p .²⁰ This is a variant on an Ancient Stoic objection to Pyrrhonian skepticism, known as the “apraxia” objection, on which the skeptic’s suspension of judgment would make action impossible; the present objection alleges that the skeptic’s self-attribution of ignorance would make rational action impossible.

However, it is unclear whether the idea that skepticism is a virtue would be threatened by the idea that you ought not use the premise that p in practical reasoning unless you know that p .

First, my arguments (§§4.1 – 4.2) are based on the idea that the skeptic will behave differently than the non-skeptic, when it comes to her dispositions to inquire and when it comes to her critical engagement with the opinions and

¹⁷ See “Moore’s Paradox” (1993, p. 211) and *Commonplace Book* VI.15 (1962, p. 277). Moore says the same, *mutatis mutandis*, about $<p$, but I don’t believe that $p >$ in “Moore’s Paradox” (1993, p. 211) and “Russell’s ‘Theory of Descriptions’” (1959, p. 175-6). See also Austin 1946.

¹⁸ Cf. Hazlett 2013, pp. 236-7

¹⁹ A controversial assumption; see Goldman 2010, Hazlett 2014.

²⁰ See Hawthorne 2004, Stanley 2005, Hawthorne and Stanley 2008; cf. Williamson 1996.

arguments of her fellow citizens (cf. §6). So, in general, I welcome the idea that skepticism has practical consequences.²¹

Second, for all I've said, the skeptic will attribute ignorance to herself only of a relatively narrow set of propositions – e.g. those concerning controversial political issues – and, therefore, it is unclear whether it is a liability that she will be rationally required to act differently than the non-skeptic, given that the practical consequences of skepticism are limited.

Third, and most importantly, it does not seem plausible that the self-attribution of ignorance, even about controversial political issues, would interfere with a person's ability to act rationally, at least with her ability to act rationally in the ways that we expect a citizen of liberal democracy to act. Consider:

You must vote in a referendum. The issue is complex and there's widespread disagreement about the right way to vote. You've given the issue some thought, although not as much as you might have given it, and have come to the conclusion that voting No is the right thing to do. You believe, but take yourself not to know, that voting No is the right thing to do. You discuss this with friends, who ask you for your opinion. "We ought to vote No," you reply, and proceed to offer your arguments. When the day of the referendum arrives, your belief has not changed, although you still think that you do not know that voting No is the right thing to do. As you fill out your ballot paper you reason as follows: "Voting No is the right thing to do, therefore, I shall vote No," and straightaway you tick the "No" box on the paper.

You've done nothing irrational in this story. It seems like a perfectly normal case of deciding how to vote, talking about your decision, and voting. I'll leave it open whether this is a counterexample to the idea that you ought not use the premise that *p* in practical reasoning unless you know that *p*, for perhaps, in the present case, you never (in some sense to be explained) use the premise that voting No is the right thing to do in your practical reasoning.²² However, I think we can generalize from this case: there is nothing irrational about expressing your opinions in the space of public reasons, even when you think your opinions do not amount to knowledge (or when you are unsure or ambivalent about whether they amount to knowledge).

5.3 Knowledge, confidence, and decisiveness

You might think that someone who knows (that *p*) will be more confident (that *p*) than someone who merely believes (that *p*). This is untrue: the

²¹ Compare the shallow kind of skeptic imagined by Wittgenstein (1969), who "does everything that the normal person does, but accompanies it with doubts or with self-annoyance, etc." (§339)

²² Cf. Hawthorne and Stanley on beliefs about probabilities (2008, pp. 581-5) and Williamson on non-serious assertions (1996, p. 498n).

credulous nitwit (who does not have knowledge) is highly confident in her opinion; the cautious sage (who does have knowledge) is not. But perhaps someone who takes herself to know (that p) will be more confident (that p) than someone who takes herself merely to reasonably believe (that p). The relevant question, for our purposes here, is whether such confidence is valuable. It's characteristic of violent fanatics that they take themselves to know the truth about morality, or politics, or religion, or whatever issue motivates their cause. The terrorist bomber never says: "I don't *know* that blowing up the embassy is the right thing to do, but after careful consideration I *think* that it is." So the value of confidence is obscure. Alternatively, you might think that someone who takes herself to know (that p) will be more decisive, in her actions, than someone who takes herself merely to reasonably believe (that p). The case of the referendum (§5.2) shows that this is not so: your vote, based on reasonable belief, can be just as decisively cast as the vote of the person who takes herself to know the right way to vote. Although your vote is based on what you take to be reasonable belief, rather than knowledge, there is no indecision, no wavering or nervousness. (We can imagine a kind of neurotic who suffers from indecision whenever she does not *know* that she is doing the right thing – but many of us aren't like that.) And, as with confidence, the value of decisiveness is obscure.

5.4 Skepticism and quietism

Above (4.1), I argued that being skeptical can function as an antidote to intellectual stagnation, in virtue of the fact that a familiar species of intellectual stagnation can result when disagreeing interlocutors both attribute knowledge to themselves, making further discussion appear pointless. You might object, however, that a different, and equally familiar, species of intellectual stagnation can result when disagreeing interlocutors attribute ignorance to themselves and to each other, in virtue of the fact that this, too, can make conversation appear pointless. The attribution of widespread ignorance, for example, can lead to a kind of quietism – since no one knows anything, there is no point in further discussion.

You might simply want to take this point as articulating a further cost of being skeptical (cf. §4.4), to which the skeptical person will be sensitive (§4.5). Discussion may require a background of common knowledge (i.e. beliefs that everyone knows that everyone takes to amount to knowledge); attributions of such common knowledge thus promote the goal of avoiding intellectual stagnation. Discussion flourishes when we challenge each other, but also requires shared assumptions and starting points.

However, we should also distinguish between merely thinking that ignorance is widespread, on the one hand, and thinking that knowledge is impossible, on the other. It is one thing to merely think that we do not know whether p, and another to think that we cannot know whether p. For the sake of argument (and, it seems to me, only for the sake of argument), we can concede that, if we cannot know whether p, then it is pointless to discuss whether p. Being skeptical (§3), however, does not involve thinking that knowledge is impossible. Even if ignorance about whether p is widespread, i.e. if we do not know whether p, it can still make sense to discuss whether p, so long as we

think something can be gained from such discussion. And the same point applies, *mutatis mutandis*, when it comes to thinking that ignorance about some topic (rather than just about some specific proposition) is widespread. So long as we think something can be gained from discussion of that topic, such discussion need not be seen as pointless. So skepticism, as understood here (§3), need not lead to quietism.

5.5 Intellectual humility vs. intellectual criticism

You might object that intellectual humility and intellectual criticism, which I said were two parts or aspects of skepticism (§3), are in some kind of problematic tension with one another. For example, you might argue that someone who takes herself to be ignorant about some topic will be less likely to challenge other people's assertions about that topic (cf. §4.3), than will the person who takes herself to be knowledgeable about that topic, or that someone who consistently challenges other people's assertions about some topic will be less likely to take herself to be ignorant about that topic, than will the person who refrains from making such challenges. Being skeptical with respect to yourself seems to imply not being skeptical with respect to other people, and being skeptical with respect to other people seems to imply not being skeptical with respect to yourself. Intellectual humility seems to imply a lack of intellectual criticism, and intellectual criticism seems to imply a lack of intellectual humility.

There are two reasons to think that there is no problematic tension here. First, recall the assumption that intellectual humility and intellectual criticism are excellences (§3). Let us agree, for example, that being skeptical with respect to yourself implies not being skeptical with respect to other people. The intellectually humble and intellectually critical person will thus be forced to choose, in particular cases, whether to be skeptical with respect to herself or whether to be skeptical with respect to other people. But given that intellectual humility and intellectual criticism are excellences, she will choose well. Compare the virtue of justice, understood (roughly) as excellence in distributing goods. The just person will often be forced to choose, in particular cases, whether to keep something for herself or whether to give it to someone else, but given that justice is an excellence, she will choose well. Thus, granting that there is some kind of tension between intellectual humility and intellectual criticism, this tension is not problematic.

Second, there is no necessary conflict between being skeptical with respect to yourself and being skeptical with respect to other people. For example, you can challenge other people's assertions about some topic without taking yourself to be knowledgeable about that topic. Colin Powell says that there was uranium in these tubes, and I know next to nothing about uranium-storing tubes, but I very much doubt that Powell knows that there was uranium in these tubes, and I demand that he provide an explanation of how he knows that there was uranium in these tubes. Recall (§4.3) that political action is compatible with the self-attribution of ignorance. Those who speak from positions of perceived expertise would sometimes prefer that non-experts remain silent – but this is merely a norm designed to serve the

interests of the powerful. Being both intellectually humble and intellectually critical may in many cases be difficult, but it isn't impossible.

6 Educating for skepticism

You might want to argue that, if x is a virtue, then we ought to educate for x , i.e. that schools ought to adopt administrative and pedagogical policies designed to promote students' possession of x . If so, given that skepticism – including intellectual humility and criticism – is a virtue (§3), we ought to educate for skepticism. However, you might question the idea that we ought to educate for *every* virtue – for perhaps some virtues lie outside the proper scope of education. You might think that piety is a virtue, for example, but think that the proper place for the inculcation of piety is at home or at church, rather than at school. Skepticism, however, looks like a better candidate for a virtue that ought to be inculcated at school. This is for (at least) two reasons. First, skepticism is a civic virtue (§3), and thus plausibly within the purview of a secular education system. Second, skepticism is valuable vis-à-vis liberal democratic society (§§4.1 – 4.3), and thus liberal democratic societies have a compelling interest in promoting it.

How might we go about educating for skepticism? What administrative or pedagogical policies might we adopt with the aim of inculcating skepticism – including intellectual humility and criticism? Here I want to sketch an approach, in which students are encouraged to be skeptical as well as asked to identify situations in which being skeptical will be good, all things considered.

Around the same time that Hume was singing the praises of mitigated skepticism in Edinburgh, Benjamin Franklin was inculcating a species of intellectual humility among his colleagues in Philadelphia.²³ In his *Autobiography*, Franklin describes a debating society called the “Junto,” founded around 1727. Given that all discussion was “to be conducted in the sincere Spirit of Enquiry after Truth ... all Expressions of Positiveness in Opinion, or of direct Contradiction, were after some time made contraband & prohibited under very small pecuniary Penalties.” (p. 61)²⁴ However, for Franklin, this principle has application beyond the confines of the Junto. In his discussion of the virtue of humility, he writes:

I ... forbid myself ... the Use of every Word or Expression in the Language that imported fix'd Opinion; such as *certainty*, *undoubtedly*, &c. and I adopted instead of them, *I conceive*, *I apprehend*, or *I imagine* a thing to be so and so, or it appears to be at present. (p. 94; see also p. 18)

Claims to certainty and indubitableness – and, we may assume, claims to knowledge – should be replaced with humbler language, such as claims to belief or opinion. The point of all this is to further “the chief Ends of

²³ Franklin and Hume would later become friendly correspondents. They met in London in 1757, in Edinburgh in 1760, and in 1772 Franklin was a guest at Hume's house in Edinburgh's New Town.

²⁴ Page references to the *Autobiography* are from Franklin 2009.

Conversation,” namely, “to *inform*, or to be *informed*, to *please* or to *persuade*.” (p. 18) Humble language (“I believe,” “In my opinion,” etc.) is conducive to the flow of information between conversational participants, makes conversation more pleasant, and provides for the possibility of rational persuasion. Dogmatic language (“I know,” “It is certain,” etc.) results in entrenchment, unpleasant conflict and divisiveness, and dialectical standoffs. Franklin clearly took the employment of humble language to be possible, as part of the suite of practices that constitute the manifestation of humility. And he also clearly took such linguistic humility to be valuable or beneficial, going so far as to require such language for the manifestation of one of his thirteen virtues.²⁵

Being skeptical (§3) is conducive to courteous and respectful conversation. The skeptical citizen will articulate and defend her political opinions by saying, “In my opinion,” or “It seems to me,” or “I believe,” by contrast with “It is certain” or “We all know.” (The latter are on the mild end of a continuum of familiar civic vulgarity.) Linguistic self-attributions of knowledge are insulting to your disagreeing interlocutors, and imply that dialogue is precluded. The person who says that she knows implies that her interlocutors are ignorant and that she has no interest in considering their position or their arguments for it. These implications undermine the possibility of reasoned dialogue. Skeptical language, by contrast, has the opposite implication: that dialogue is open, that interlocutors are respected, that arguments will be heard.

For our present purposes, what is most interesting is Franklin’s policy of linguistic humility. We can adopt a similar policy in the classroom, although perhaps for fear of bankrupting our children, we can replace Franklin’s system of penalties, for being dogmatic, with a system of rewards, for being skeptical. When a student is skeptical – when she admits that she does not know something, or when she challenges someone else’s assertion – she receives a reward – money, praise, candy, a gold star, whatever passes for currency in a particular classroom. However, any system of this kind ought to be combined with a policy that requires reflection on the benefits and costs of being skeptical. First, just as the person who uses a “swear jar” must eventually learn not to curse for the sake of not offending other people, rather than just to avoid paying the penalty, citizens in liberal democracies must eventually learn to be skeptical for the sake of liberal democratic society (among other things), rather than just for receiving the relevant rewards. This matters on the assumption that being skeptical “in the right way” requires being sensitive to the values promoted by skepticism (cf. §4). Consider someone who

²⁵ Two caveats on the idea that Franklin defends intellectual humility as a virtue. First, Franklin is best understood as defending the utility of pretended or performed humility, rather than humility proper. His explicit proposals always concern linguistic professions of ignorance, rather than beliefs about oneself. (Contrast this with Hume’s discussion of pride and vanity at *Treatise* III.iii.2.) Second, for Franklin, the value of humility is prudential – he is concerned with the benefits of humble language for the person use uses it, rather than for her society or for people in general. (Contrast this with Hume’s utilitarian account of virtue.)

employs Franklin's humble language merely because she is afraid to be wrong, or to be proven wrong, or someone (like Franklin himself) who employs such language merely for the purposes of persuasion. You might think that these people do not yet possess the *virtue* of skepticism (§3) – for that they must come to employ humble language for the right reasons. Second, and more important, the proposed system was insensitive to the good, all things considered. Someone possessing the virtue of skepticism will not attribute ignorance, for example, no matter what – she will do this at the right time and in the right way (cf. §4.5). The proposed system suggests, and might internalize an appreciation for, the value of being skeptical. Older students, however, will be in a position to balance this value against others. Think again of the limited usefulness of the “swear jar” – once the bad habit of excessive cursing has been kicked, the virtuous person thinks about the value and costs of cursing, and (if all goes well) learns to curse at the right time and in the right way.

The proposed system is based on an understanding of Franklin's Junto rule, on which the purpose of the rule was not merely to reduce or eliminate dogmatic language at the Junto Club, but to serve as a constant reminder of the independent problems with dogmatic language – with small pecuniary penalties standing in as representatives of the independent pro tanto disvalue of speaking dogmatically. Just as a “swear jar” is meant to make us think twice before cursing, the Junto rule is meant to make us think twice before attributing knowledge. My proposed system, along similar lines, is meant to make students eager to take opportunities to speak humbly or critically.

You might object that the proposed system would serve only to inculcate certain linguistic habits, leaving students free to attribute knowledge, to themselves or others, in thought. This is of course a possibility. But linguistic habits and habits of thought are causally connected. Changing the way we speak can change the way we think; outer patterns of behavior often become inner patterns of thought. This is why we ask our children say “I'm sorry” even when we know they don't (yet) mean it; this is why ask them not use “gay” as a derogative adjective even though this (alone) will not make them any less homophobic. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, when it comes to saying “In my opinion” and not saying “As we all know.”

7 Is skepticism an intellectual virtue?

Intellectual humility appears on some lists of intellectual virtues.²⁶ Above, I treated intellectual humility as a part of aspect of skepticism (§3). Is skepticism, as understood here, an intellectual virtue? The expression “intellectual virtue” is ambiguous (cf. §2). On a predicative disambiguation of “intellectual virtue,” this refers to something that is both a virtue and (in a sense that would need to be articulated) intellectual. On an attributive disambiguation of “intellectual virtue,” this refers to something that is a virtue in some intellectual sense of “virtue” (that would need to be articulated). Is skepticism an intellectual virtue, on either of these disambiguations?

²⁶ See, for example, Zagzebski 1996, p. 114 and *passim*, Baehr 2011, p. 21.

On a predicative disambiguation of “intellectual virtue,” this depends on what we mean by saying that something (e.g. a virtue) is “intellectual.” Suppose we were to say that a virtue is intellectual when it essentially belongs to the **intellectual domain**, where this comprises the (individual or collective) generation and sharing of information. Belief-formation (the traditional epistemologist’s interest) is included here, but also the formation of other kinds of representation, the transfer of information between people (e.g. testimony), and the practices and institutions that regulate all these in a society. It seems then that skepticism is an intellectual virtue, since your dispositions to attribute ignorance, to withhold attributing knowledge, and to question whether people know have clear and straightforward connections with the aforementioned activities.

On an attributive disambiguation of “intellectual virtue,” it is unclear whether skepticism is an intellectual virtue. Ernest Sosa (1991), employing an attributive disambiguation, offers the following definition of intellectual virtue: “a quality bound to help maximize one’s surplus of truth over error.” (p. 225) Nothing I’ve said here suggests that skepticism would maximize your surplus of truth over error – although it may well do so. However, consider the possibility of situations in which (for example) attributing ignorance to yourself will benefit your society (e.g. by promoting engagement with disagreeing interlocutors) at the expense of the project of maximizing your surplus of truth over error (e.g. because attributing knowledge to yourself would have enabled you to confidently acquire more). It may well be that being skeptical at the right time and in the right way (i.e. when it is best, all things considered, to be skeptical) happens also to maximize your surplus of truth over error. But this does not follow from anything I have said so far, and I think it would be a kind of happy coincidence if it turned out to be the case.

8 Conclusion

That there is this connection between skepticism and liberal democracy is not surprising, given the assumption that liberal democracy is distinguished from other social models by its superior treatment of difference – in short, by the way it handles disagreement. In liberal democracies we expect, and celebrate, the existence of deep and fundamental differences between people: in their views, in their religious beliefs and practices, in their moralities and epistemologies, in their preferences and values, in their ways of life. Political liberals – Mill and Rawls, among others, come to mind – have always emphasized the political importance of recognizing and respecting difference. Skeptics, for their part, have always emphasized the epistemological importance of difference. Sextus Empiricus was inspired and fascinated by both cultural and individual differences²⁷, and Hume made much of “the vast variety of inclinations and pursuits among our species, where each man seems fully satisfied with his own course of life, and would esteem it the greatest unhappiness to be confined to that of his neighbor.”²⁸ The “liberal” part of

²⁷ See *Outlines of Scepticism*, I 79-90, I 145-62, III 199-228.

²⁸ “The Sceptic,” p. 95. Imagining that the reader will insist that “we come to a philosopher to be instructed, how we shall chose our ends,” (p. 97) Hume spends the rest of the essay offering a rather half-hearted and sarcastic

liberal democracy aims to secure each person's satisfaction with her own course of life, and to ensure that no one is forced to adopt the life of her neighbor. The "democracy" parts aims to deal with the resulting plurality of ways of life, by providing a means for peaceful coordination between a diverse group of people. My account of skepticism is based on the idea that being skeptical is valuable in liberal democratic societies, where difference is an inevitable and essential element.²⁹

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defense of the life of the philosopher, concluding that it is "one of the most amusing in which life could possibly be employed." (p. 113)

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