

**QUIDDITISM**

by

Dustin Troy Locke

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor James M. Joyce, Chair  
Professor H. D. Cameron  
Professor Allan F. Gibbard  
Assistant Professor Andrew Michael Egan

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## CONTENTS

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
Introduction: What is Quidditism?.....	1
Chapter	
One. Quidditism without Quiddities.....	14
Two. Quiddistic Skepticism.....	36
Three. The Practical Significance of Skepticism.....	58
Bibliography.....	102

## ABSTRACT

In general, properties realize certain roles in the workings of nature. For example, *mass* makes objects resist acceleration. But what is the relationship between these roles and the properties that realize them? According to ‘quidditism’, the roles are *contingently* realized by the properties that in fact realize them. Opponents charge that quidditism implies the existence of epiphenomenal and unknowable “quiddities” or “inner natures”. The purpose of this dissertation is to argue in favor of quidditism and explore its epistemic and pragmatic consequences.

I begin by showing that certain considerations from physics show that properties cannot be individuated via their nomological roles, as anti-quidditism maintains. I then argue that quidditism can be had without epiphenomenal and unknowable quiddities. The arguments to the contrary proceed either from a misconception of what quidditism is, or they rely on an implicit assumption to the effect that quidditism implies that there is *something* in virtue of which properties are individuated from one another.

I turn next to an examination of quidditism’s epistemic implications. Here I develop and defend a posthumously published paper by David Lewis. Following Lewis, I argue that quidditism implies that we will never know which properties realize at least some of the nomological roles. At the core of my case is an argument against the common claim that quidditist skepticism is merely a species of traditional external-world skepticism.

Finally, having argued that quidditistic skepticism importantly differs from traditional external-world skepticism, I explore which, if either of these two types of skepticism have *practical* implications—that is, implications for how we ought to live our lives. I begin by getting clearer on the distinction between traditional external-world

skepticism and quidditistic skepticism, showing that the former is of a kind I call ‘Cartesian skepticism’, while the latter is of a kind I call ‘Kantian skepticism’. A skepticism is Cartesian, on my terminology, if it posits ignorance of *graspable* facts; while it is Kantian if it posits ignorance of *ungraspable* facts. Finally, I argue that, in general, Cartesian skepticisms have drastic practical implications while Kantian skepticisms have none at all.

**INTRODUCTION:  
WHAT IS QUIDDITISM?**

What is the relationship between a property and its role in the workings of nature? For example, what is the relationship between *mass* and its role of making objects resist acceleration? Is *mass* inextricably linked with its role, or is there a sense in which the two are distinct? According to one view, properties and their roles can in some sense ‘come apart’. The unfortunate name for this thesis is ‘quidditism’, and its recently come in for some heavy criticism.

Now I can’t do anything about quidditism’s awkward name, but this dissertation is largely an attempt to defend its reputation. In the chapters that follow I will be primarily interested in three questions: (1) Is quidditism *true*? (2) Does quidditism have any *epistemic* implications? And (3) do the epistemic implications of quidditism, if there are any, have any *practical* significance? These, respectively, are the questions of the three chapters that follow, and my answers will be ‘yes’, ‘yes’, and ‘no’.

But before we get to these topics, we need to know more precisely what quidditism is. Although the term has been in the literature since David Armstrong’s (1989), it has been less than clear what quidditism is supposed to be. In particular, there seems to be a tension between the ways that ‘quidditism’ has been *defined* and the way that ‘quidditism’ has been *used*. Getting clear on these matters is the primary task of the present chapter. At the end, there will be a brief outline of the chapters to come.

I said that the rough idea behind quidditism is that properties in some sense ‘come apart from’ their roles in nature (hereafter, their ‘nomological roles’). To make this



precise, we need to answer two questions: what do we mean by ‘a property’s nomological role’, and what do we mean when we say that properties ‘come apart from’ their nomological roles?

### **Section One: What do we Mean by ‘a Property’s Nomological Role’?**

This question is relatively easy. To take a simple example, suppose we live in a Newtonian world. Then the property *mass* figures in the law that between any two objects with mass there is force proportional to the product of their masses divided by the square of the distance between them (Newton’s Law of Gravitation). It also figures in the law that the net force on a given object is equal to the product of its mass and acceleration (Newton’s Second Law of Motion). The nomological role of *mass* is simply the role of being the property  $x$  such that between any two objects with  $x$  there is a force proportional to the products of their respective amounts of  $x$ , divided by the square of the distance between them, and the net force on any object is equal to the product of its amount of  $x$  and its acceleration.

More generally, when we say that a property plays a certain nomological role, we mean that it is the property that does such and such, where the ‘such and such’ is defined in the following way. Start by considering each fundamental natural law in which the given property figures. Now conjoin the statements of each of these laws into one long sentence. Now replace each occurrence of the word for the property in question with a free variable. That gives us an open sentence ‘... $x$ ...’. The role of the given property is thus the role of being the property  $x$  such that...  $x$ ....

Every definition of ‘quidditism’ that I know of agrees that roles are to be defined in this way. The more difficult question is the second question mentioned above: what do we mean when we say that a property ‘comes apart from’ its role? I will be answering this question in the course of the next two sections. My strategy will be to begin with the most

widely cited definition of ‘quidditism’, which I will then tweak, step by step, into an acceptable definition.

## **Section Two: Paying Our Respects to Black’s Definition**

One common way for philosophers to precisify rough ideas about distinctness, or about one thing’s ‘coming apart from’ another, is in terms of what *could have been*. Moreover, philosophers have tried to understand talk about what *could have been* in terms of *possible worlds*. (For now, simply think of a possible world as a maximally specific way that things could have been.) Putting these two ideas together, philosophers often formulate theses about distinctness directly in terms of possible worlds.

The most widely cited,<sup>1</sup> and the first *explicitly* given definition of ‘quidditism’,<sup>2</sup> does exactly this. In Robert Black’s ‘Against Quidditism’ (2000) he writes

[According to one view,] nothing *constitutes* the fact that a certain quality playing a certain nomological role in that world is identical with a certain quality playing a different role in ours; they just are the same quality, and that's all that can be said. Since the fashion is to mine the Scottish tradition for technical terms in this area, let us use the word 'quidditism' for the acceptance of primitive identity between fundamental qualities across possible worlds. (p.92)

According to this definition, quidditism is the thesis that when a property that plays a certain nomological role in one possible world is identical to a property that plays a

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Stephen Mumford (2004: 151) and David Lewis (2008: 7) both cite Black’s definition. And although she doesn’t cite Black, Ann Whittle (2006) defines quidditism as ‘the acceptance of primitive property identity across possible worlds’ (p. 463).

<sup>2</sup> Although Armstrong (1989) uses the term ‘quidditism’, he never explicitly defines it. It is clear from the context, however, what he means by it. Armstrong’s (implicit) definition of ‘quidditism’ is discussed at length in section four of the present chapter.

different nomological role in another possible world, there is nothing that *constitutes* the fact that the one property is *the same property* as the ‘other’.

Notice that, taken quite literally, quidditism on Black’s definition is compatible with the view that it is *never* the case that a property playing one role in one world is identical with a property playing a different role in a different world—it merely says that *when* that happens, there is nothing that constitutes the fact that the one property is identical with the other. Indeed, if that were never the case, then quidditism, on Black’s definition, would be vacuously true.

Almost certainly Black did not intend his definition to be taken quite so literally. Rather, he intended quidditism to be the thesis that there *are* cases in which a property playing one role in one world is identical with a property playing a different role in another world, and when this happens there is nothing that constitutes the fact that the one property is identical with the other. Let’s call this

**Black’s Definition.** Sometimes, a property that plays one role in one world is identical with a property that plays a different role in a different world, and when this happens there is nothing that constitutes the fact that the one property is identical with the other.

Formulating Black’s definition this way, we can see that the second conjunct—the conjunct which we originally took to be *all* of quidditism on Black’s definition—is actually quite trivial. Suppose that a property playing a certain nomological role in one world really is *identical* with a property playing a certain nomological role in another world. When we ask whether something constitutes this fact, what are we asking? Taken literally, we are asking this: given a property P that plays one role in one world and a different role in another world,

1. What constitutes the fact that  $P = P$ ?

That the answer to this question should be ‘nothing’ seems quite obvious. As Lewis (1986) has put it,

There is never any problem of what makes something identical to itself; nothing can ever fail to be. And there is never any problem about what makes two things identical; two things never can be identical. (pp.192 – 93)<sup>3</sup>

We should say exactly this in response to Black’s suggestion that the debate over quidditism should be understood, in part, as a debate over whether there is anything that *makes* (i.e. constitutes the fact that) a property in one world is identical with a property in another. As it is with respect to individuals, the answer to *that* question is easy: nothing *makes* something identical with itself, nothing *constitutes* the fact that a property is identical with itself.

The first, and implicit, part of Black’s definition of ‘quidditism’ is the important part: there is a non-trivial debate over whether a property in one world is *ever* identical with a property playing a different role in different world. According, let us drop the second conjunct from Black’s definition and call the resulting definition

**The Transworld-identity Definition.** Sometimes, a property that plays a certain nomological role in one world is identical with a property that plays a different nomological role in a different world.

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis is here responding to the suggestion that the debate over haecceitism (which is to individuals as quidditism is to properties—see below) is a debate over whether there is something that *makes* an individual in one world identical with an individual in another, supposing that there are such individuals. He is responding by saying that the answer to *that* question is easy: nothing ever *makes* something identical with itself.

Now we're getting closer. But not close enough.

First, this definition makes quidditism *seem* like a thesis about *identity*—in particular, about transworld identity. But this puts the emphasis in the wrong place. Here we can take another page from Lewis's (1986) book.

We *do* state plenty of problems in terms of identity. But we *needn't* state them so. Therefore, they are not problems about identity. Is it ever so that an F is identical to a G? That is, is it ever so that the same thing is an F, and also a G? More simply, is it ever so that an F is a G? The identity drops out. (p. 193)

It's misleading to say that we are interested in the question of whether one property playing one role in one world is ever *identical* with a property playing a different role in another world. To make the proper emphasis clear, we should follow Lewis's advice and let 'the identity drop out'. Let's call the resulting definition of 'quidditism'

**The Same-property/Different-role Definition.** Sometimes, a property that plays one nomological role in one world plays a different nomological role in a different world.<sup>4</sup>

I think that the same-property/different-role definition successfully captures something one might mean when he says that properties 'come apart from' their nomological roles.

Unfortunately, this definition is still unsatisfactory, and for two reasons.

Here's the first reason. Above I suggested that you think of possible worlds, for the time being, as maximally specific *ways* that things might have been. But not all theorists agree that possible worlds should be understood in this way. So-called *modal realists*

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<sup>4</sup> Note that this definition of 'quidditism' is equivalent to the former. Their different names merely reflect the difference in emphasis. (The identity doesn't really drop out; the *mention* of identity drops out.)

claim that possible worlds are things just like the actual world: they are hunks of concrete space and time (or spacetime) that may or may not contain concrete material objects or physical fields. Unfortunately, such a view makes trouble for the same-property/different-role definition of quidditism. And although modal realism is by no means the most popular view of possible worlds, we need to make room for it.

To see how modal realism causes trouble for our above definition of ‘quidditism’, suppose you’re a modal realist and you think that properties are ‘world-bound’ entities—that is, suppose you think that one and the same property is never present at more than one possible world. In that case, ‘quidditism’ on the same-property/different-role definition will be trivially false: since *mass* exists only in this world, there is no world where *mass* plays a different role. Still, you might think that the proper analysis of sentences like ‘*Mass* could have played a different role’ is in terms of counterparts: ‘*Mass* could have played a different role’ is true if and only if there is a possible world in which a *counterpart* of *mass* plays a role distinct from the role played by *mass* in this world. But to say that *mass* could have played a different role is certainly to say that *mass* is in some sense distinct from its role. Thus, although the same-property/different-role definition seems to force this kind of a modal realist into rejecting quidditism, there is a very important sense in which such a modal realist can still claim that properties come apart from their roles.

No later than we suggest this problem do we see its solution. It seems that ‘quidditism’ ought to be defined as follows:

**The Anti-supervenience Definition.** For any property P and its nomological role R, P could have played some role other than R.

According to this definition, quidditism is the view that nomological roles do not *supervene* on the properties that realize them. To say that one thing supervenes on another is just to say that things could not have been different with respect to the former unless they were different with respect to the latter. On the above definition, quidditism is the view that

things *could have been* different with respect to which role is realized *without* having been different with respect to which property realized the role.

Here we choose to define quidditism not in terms of possible worlds, but simply in terms of what could have been. This leaves room for modal realists and others to disagree about how best to understand talk of what could have been, without immediately forcing them to accept/reject quidditism. The modal realist who thinks properties are world-bound and uses counterparts to evaluate possibility claims, for example, can either accept quidditism, saying that there is a world in which a counterpart of *mass* plays a role distinct from *mass*'s actual role, or reject quidditism, saying there is no such counterpart of *mass*.

Now we're getting pretty close to a workable definition of 'quidditism'. Still, I said that there is a second problem for the same-property/different-role definition, and that problem is not avoided by moving to the above anti-supervenience definition. I discuss the problem and its solution in the next section.

### **Section Three: Haecceitism, Quidditistic Skepticism, and a New Definition**

To see why there is a problem for the above definition of 'quidditism', I want to briefly discuss the analogy between quidditism and haecceitism. Haecceitism, quite roughly, is the view that individuals 'come apart from' their qualitative characters. There have been several attempts to make haecceitism more precise, but most theorists now follow Lewis (1986) in defining 'haecceitism' as an anti-supervenience thesis.

**The Anti-supervenience Definition of 'Haecceitism'**. For any individual A and its qualitative character C, C might have been had by some individual other than A.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This is almost Lewis's (1986) definition of 'haecceitism'. A bit more precisely, Lewis defines 'haecceitism' as the view that there are at least two possible worlds  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  such that (1)  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  are qualitatively exactly alike, and yet (2) there is some actual individual A such that the counterpart of A in  $w_1$  has a different

Quidditism, it is often said, is meant to be to properties as haecceitism is to individuals. And the above anti-supervenience definition of ‘quidditism’ preserves this analogy quite nicely. But not perfectly: while haecceitism denies that individuals *supervene on* their qualitative characters, quidditism, on the above definition, denies that a property’s *role* supervenes on *it*. In other words, the *direction* of supervenience denied by haecceitism is not analogous to the *direction* of supervenience denied by quidditism.

Of course, this disanalogy is little reason to reject one definition of ‘quidditism’ in favor of another. Why should we take the alleged analogy between haecceitism and quidditism so seriously? After all, the two theses are only supposed to be analogous in so far as they both hold that one type of thing ‘comes apart from’ another type of thing, and the phrase ‘comes apart from’ is quite ambiguous: *one way* to make it precise is to deny supervenience in one direction; *another way* is to deny supervenience in the other direction. Why not simply rest content with having haecceitism deny supervenience in one direction and quidditism deny it in the other? Fortunately, we have good reason to take the analogy seriously: the way quidditism has been *used*.

The primary use of quidditism within the philosophical literature is to support a particular epistemological position known as ‘quiddistic skepticism’. Roughly, quiddistic skepticism is the view that we will never come to know *which properties* realize the fundamental nomological roles realized at our world. David Lewis (2008) is the champion of quiddistic skepticism, and his argument can be summarized as follows.

If there are facts about which properties realize which roles—that is, facts over and above the mere facts about which roles are realized—then those fact are beyond the realm of empirical inquiry. Let us call these worrisome facts, if there are any,

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qualitative character than the counterpart of A in  $w_2$ . Are these definitions equivalent? I think they are, but the difference between them, if there is any, needn’t concern us here.



‘quidditistic facts’. According to quidditism, there *are* quidditistic facts, because quidditism is the view that properties ‘come apart from’ their roles. But quidditistic facts are contingent facts about our world and, hence, if they are beyond the realm of empirical inquiry, then they are simply unknowable.

Of course, this line of reasoning needs much explaining and defense, and this is *the* task of Chapter Two. For now, let us simply focus on the role of quidditism in the argument, which is to imply that there are facts *beyond* the mere facts about which roles are realized—namely, there are facts about *which* property realizes those roles. Our question is thus this: does quidditism, on the anti-supervenience definition given above, imply that there are such facts?

Unfortunately, it does not. Consider *mass* and its nomological role, call it ‘R’. Suppose that *mass* could have realized some role distinct from R. If so, then quidditism, on the anti-supervenience definition above, is true. Still, it is consistent with this that, necessarily, if R is realized, then R is realized by *mass*. (Just imagine a possible world in which R is not realized and *mass* or its counterpart realizes some role other than R.) Now consider (1) the proposition that R is realized and (2) the proposition that *mass* realizes R. Since at every possible world where R is realized, it is realized by *mass* (we are supposing), (1) necessarily implies (2). And since at every possible world where *mass* realizes R, R is realized (trivially), (2) necessarily implies (1). Hence, propositions (1) and (2) are necessarily equivalent. Thus, if facts are individuated no more fine-grainedly than necessarily equivalent propositions, then the fact that *mass* realizes R *just is* the fact that R is realized.<sup>6</sup> In that case, there is no fact about which property realizes R that is *beyond* the mere fact that R is realized—that is, there is no quidditistic fact about the role R.

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<sup>6</sup> What if facts are individuated more finely than necessarily equivalent propositions? In that case, there might still be a fact about which property realizes R that is beyond the mere fact that R is realized. But if there is such a fact, its existence has nothing to do with quidditism on the above definition. Again, we’re in

What we have just seen is that denying that roles supervene on the properties that realize them does imply that there are quiddistic facts. But now the solution should be coming into view: to get quiddistic facts we need to deny that *properties* supervene on their *roles*.

**The Revised Anti-supervenience Definition.** For any property P and its nomological role R, R might have been realized by some property other than P.

On this definition, quidditism clearly implies that there are quiddistic facts. If there is a possible world where R is realized but not realized by *mass* or a counterpart of *mass*, then propositions (1) and (2) are non-equivalent—the proposition that *mass* realizes R is *more specific* than the proposition that R is realized. Thus, if facts are individuated at least as finely as propositions, there is a fact about *which* property realizes R that is beyond the mere fact that R is realized.

We are now several steps removed from Black’s definition of ‘quidditism’. Nonetheless, the above definition is to be preferred to all the others. Unlike Black’s original definition, it makes quidditism non-trivial; unlike the transworld-identity definition, it captures the intuitive idea of properties ‘coming apart from’ their roles; unlike the same-property/different-role definition, it’s as congenial to those who think that properties are world-bound as those who don’t; and unlike the original anti-supervenience definition, it makes quidditism imply that there are quiddistic facts. In addition to all this, the revised anti-supervenience definition makes the analogy between quidditism and haecceitism (on Lewis’s definition) just about as tight as it can be. For these reasons, I henceforth adopt the revised anti-supervenience definition as my official definition of ‘quidditism’.

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search of a definition of ‘quidditism’ according to which *quidditism* plays a key role in implying the existence of such facts.

We arrived at our preferred definition of ‘quidditism’ by starting with Black’s definition and working out the kinks. But there is another place we might have started in search for a definition, and it wouldn’t do justice to our topic not to consider that starting point here.

#### **Section Four: Quiddityism**

I noted above that although Black (2000) was the first to explicitly define ‘quidditism’, he was not the first to use the term. That title would seem to go to David Armstrong (1989), who first used the term ‘quidditism’ as follows.

Haecceitism for individuals is parallel to Quidditism for universals. Quidditism for universals seems very plausible. Each universal must surely have its own nature.  
(p. 59)

Although Armstrong does not explicitly *define* ‘quidditism’, it’s clear from the context how he understands it:

**Armstrong’s Definition.** Each property has its own nature.<sup>7</sup>

Armstrong had previously introduced the term ‘quiddity’, which he understands as a property’s ‘nature’ (p. 44, 55). So for Armstrong, quidditism is simply the acceptance of quiddities.

What might Armstrong mean here by ‘nature’ or ‘quiddity’? Clearly, he cannot take a property’s quiddity to be its nomological role. If we understood ‘quiddity’ or

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<sup>7</sup> If not all properties are ‘genuine universals’, I hereby stipulate that I use the term ‘property’ to refer only to the latter.

‘nature’ in that way, then quidditism on Armstrong’s definition clearly wouldn’t capture anything one might mean when she says that properties ‘come apart from’ their roles.

Much more plausibly, *quiddity* is to be understood on analogy with *haecceity*. Indeed, on p. 44 Armstrong writes, ‘[P]roperties and relations do have their own haecceity, or, better, their quiddity or nature.’ A haecceity is supposed to be an individual’s *thisness*, where an individual’s *thisness* is a non-qualitative property that serves to individuate that individual from all other individuals. If we like, we can say it is the property of being *this individual*. Now Armstrong denies that there are such properties as haecceities. But he seems to think that we have a clear enough grasp of what a haecceity *would be* to understand, by analogy, what a quiddity is supposed to be. Taking the analogy seriously, let’s say that a quiddity is a property’s *suchness*, where a property’s *suchness* is a non-role-involving (second-order) property that serves to individuate that property from all other properties.

Many authors have understood ‘quiddity’ in exactly this way, and many have followed Armstrong in taking quidditism to be the acceptance of quiddities. These authors accept a definition of ‘quidditism’ that I’ll call

**Quiddityism.** Each possible property has its own *quiddity*, where a property’s *quiddity* is a non-role-involving (second-order) property that serves to individuate that (first-order) property from all other properties.

What then is the relationship between quidditism, on our official definition, and quiddityism? Some authors seem to have treated them as though they were equivalent, or as those one entails the other. In the next chapter I argue that neither is the case: quiddities can be had without quidditism, and, even more importantly, quidditism can be had without quiddities. I think that much of the resistance to quidditism has stemmed from an understandable fear of ‘quiddities’. But if what I say in Chapter One is correct, fear of quiddities ought not become fear of quidditism.

## Section Five: Chapter Outline

Having settled on an acceptable definition of ‘quidditism’, it’s time to get down to brass tacks. I begin in Chapter One by defending quidditism against its two most common objections. The first objection is an argument from how properties are individuated. According to this argument, properties are individuated by their nomological roles, and hence any property that realizes, e.g., the role of *mass* must therefore be *mass*. Against this I argue that, given the possibility of certain symmetries in nomological role, properties simply cannot be individuated by their roles. The second common argument against quidditism charges that quidditism implies a certain kind of epiphenomenalism. This argument, I contend, confuses quidditism with quiddityism.

In Chapter Two I turn to the question of whether quidditism has any epistemic implications—in particular, whether it has any *skeptical* implications. Here I develop and defend David Lewis’s posthumous ‘Ramseyan Humility’ (2008), where Lewis argues for quiddistic skepticism. My discussion here is aimed at getting clear on exactly what quiddistic skepticism is, why Lewis thinks quiddistic skepticism follows from quidditism, and how quiddistic skepticism differs from more familiar types of skepticism. The last of these is especially important, as several philosophers have charged that quiddistic skepticism is akin to traditional skepticism about the external world (and can be refuted as such). I argue that this is not the case.

In Chapter Three, the final chapter, I turn to the question of whether quiddistic skepticism has any practical significance. But I do so only within the context of a much larger discussion. Chapter Three is really a *general* discussion of the practical significance of all types of skepticism and thus ought to be of interest even to those epistemologists who couldn’t care less about quidditism. My strategy in this chapter is to first make two, cross-cutting, mutually exclusive and exhaustive distinctions between types of skepticism. I then

argue that skepticisms of only one of these types have practical implications. As it happens, quiddistic skepticism is of one of the types *without* practical significance.

## CHAPTER ONE

### QUIDDITISM WITHOUT QUIDDITIES

Quidditism is roughly the idea that properties ‘come apart from’ their roles in the workings of nature. More precisely, quidditism is the thesis that for some property P and its nomological role R, R might have been realized by some property other than P. In this chapter I argue in favor of quidditism.

My strategy begins by arguing against quidditism’s chief rival, dispositionalism, according to which properties are *individuated by* their roles in nature.<sup>8</sup> I then defend quidditism against the common objection that it implies a kind of epiphenomenalism. As a relative newcomer to the philosophical stage, there has been much confusion over what exactly quidditism implies, and a crucial part of my defense will be to clear-up some of this confusion.

This chapter addresses the debate over quidditism, a squarely metaphysical debate. Nonetheless, the topic here is directly relevant to a certain epistemological debate, and so it might be helpful to introduce the debate over quidditism via a brief discussion of the epistemological question. Here the discussion will be quite brief, as the epistemological issue surrounding quidditism is the central topic of Chapter Two.

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<sup>8</sup> As we’ll see, quidditism and dispositions are not strictly speaking ‘rivals’: while dispositionalism is a view about *how properties are individuated*, quidditism is a view about *whether properties and their nomological roles* are necessarily connected. These two questions are closely related, but it will be important to see that they are not the same question.

## Section One: Knowledge, Possibility, and Quidditism

Upon arriving home, I come to have overwhelming evidence that a dog got into the kitchen trash. However, there are two dogs that live in my house—Tolstoy and Cyrus—and I do not have evidence that tells me *which* dog committed the crime. Hence, I know that *some* dog got into the trash without knowing *which* dog got into the trash.

The lesson I want to take from this little example is that in some sense knowing is a matter of being able to rule-out mere possibilities.<sup>9</sup> There are at least two possibilities concerning which dog got into the trash: the possibility that Tolstoy got into the trash and the possibility that Cyrus got into the trash. Let us assume that, in fact, Tolstoy got into the trash. Not having evidence that rules-out the *merely possible*—that is, the possibility that Cyrus got into the trash—in favor of the *possible and actual*—that is, the possibility that Tolstoy got into the trash—I don't know which possibility obtains—that is, I don't know which dog got into the trash.

Now consider an analogous case. Suppose someone, let's call him 'Newton', gets bopped on the head by an apple. After much observation, thought, and testing, he comes to know that there is some property, he decides to call it 'mass', that makes objects resist acceleration and attract one another.<sup>10</sup> Question: does Newton thereby know *which* property makes objects resist acceleration and attract one another? As in the case of the dogs, it seems that he does not: knowing is a matter of ruling-out the merely possible and, for all that's been said so far, Newton does not have any evidence that rules-out the merely

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<sup>9</sup> There are of course many controversies surrounding this assumption. Which possibilities need to be ruled-out? What does it take to 'rule-out' a possibility? What are possibilities? I can't go into these controversies here, but note that as long as we're willing to be flexible enough about the answers to these further questions, almost everyone should be happy accepting the assumption.

<sup>10</sup> More accurately: Newton comes to know that there is some property that makes objects resist acceleration in proportion to the amount of it they have and attract one another in proportion to the product of the amounts of it they have divided by the square of the distance between them. But for short, I'll just say he discovers that there is some property that makes objects resist acceleration and attract one another.



possible—that is, the possibilities that might have but do not obtain—concerning which property makes objects resist acceleration and attract one another.

But not so fast: *are there* mere possibilities in this case? Or is the property that *actually* make objects resist acceleration and attract one another the only property that *could have* made objects resist acceleration and attract one another?<sup>11</sup> The view that says there *are* mere possibilities is called:

**Quidditism.** For any property P and its nomological role R, R might have been realized by a property other than P.

Let me make a few comments on this definition of ‘quidditism’.

*First comment.* As I argued in the introduction, I hope this definition captures the spirit, if not the letter of Robert Black’s (2000) definition, which appears to be the first explicit definition of ‘quidditism’ in the literature.<sup>12</sup> Please see the Introduction for a thorough discussion of why I opt for the above definition rather than Black’s.

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<sup>11</sup> There is a third possibility here, and it’s one that anti-realists will have a strong affinity for. This is the possibility that *there is no* property that realizes the role in question, or, perhaps, it is simply *meaningless* to talk about their being such a property. I do not take this to be an entirely implausible view. Nevertheless, the debate between realists and anti-realists about whether there are properties that realize the roles described by our scientific theories will not be my concern here.

<sup>12</sup> David Armstrong (1989, p.59) uses, but does not explicitly define the term ‘quidditism’. However, the context makes it fairly clear that he takes quidditism to be the thesis that properties have *quiddities*. I briefly discussed this thesis in the introduction and I will be discussing it at length below. An interesting side note: W.V.O. Quine’s *Quiddity: An Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary* (1989) contains no entry for ‘quiddity’ nor ‘quidditism’.

*Second comment.* What do I mean by a property's 'nomological role'? Take for instance *mass*. Supposing we live in a Newtonian world, the complete statement of the natural laws of our world will contain conjuncts such as 'massive objects resist acceleration in such and such way' and 'massive objects attract one another in such and such a way'. To define the nomological role of *mass*, we replace each occurrence of the term 'mass' in the complete statement of the laws with a free variable. This will give us an open sentence which contains conjuncts such as 'objects that have x resist acceleration in such and such a way' and 'objects that have x attract one another in such and such a way'. The nomological role of *mass* is the role of being the property x such that objects that have x resist acceleration in such and such a way and objects that have x attract one another in such and such a way... and so on. The nomological role of *mass* is thus a certain second-order property had by the first-order property *mass*.

*Third comment.* Quidditism, as I have defined it, is the thesis that a given nomological role is contingently realized by a given property. As I make clear in the Introduction, this is *distinct* from the thesis that a given property contingently realizes its nomological role.<sup>13</sup> The latter thesis, I take it, is what some people mean when they say that the laws of nature are contingent. To see that this thesis is not equivalent to quidditism, consider the nomological role actually realized by *mass*, and suppose that this role might have been realized by some property distinct from mass, let's call it 'schmass'. If so, then the nomological role actually realized

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<sup>13</sup> David Lewis seems to think otherwise when he writes '...do such properties as these have their nomological or causal roles essentially? If so, as has been suggested by Shoemaker and by Swoyer, then a property with the nomological role of a certain quark colour would have to be that quark colour...' (1986, p. 162.) As the remainder of the above paragraph attempts to demonstrate, the inference in the second sentence here is fallacious. If I'm right about this, then the argument that Lewis is giving at p. 162 of (1986) against linguistic ersatzism is actually premised on quidditism, not the contingency of natural laws.

by *mass* is contingently realized by *mass*, and so quidditism is true. However, this is consistent with *mass* necessarily realizing its nomological role. All that's required for the latter to be the case is that in any possible world *where there is mass*, *mass* realizes the same nomological role that it actually realizes.

An analogy might help. The claim that the role of being the U.S. president in 2001 is contingently realized by George W. Bush is not equivalent to the claim that George W. Bush contingently realizes the role of being the U.S. president in 2001. Al Gore might have been the U.S. president in 2001. This means that the role of being the U.S. president in 2001 is contingently realized by George W. Bush. However, this is consistent with the claim that George W. Bush is necessarily the U.S. president in 2001. All that's required for the latter to be the case is that in any possible world *where George W. Bush exists*, George W. Bush is the U.S. president in 2001.<sup>14</sup>

Some philosophers object to quidditism on anti-realist grounds.<sup>15</sup> In this chapter, however, I will be concerned merely with the domestic dispute amongst those who think there *really are* properties that realize the nomological roles. Amongst realists, there are two common objections to quidditism: the argument from property individuation—which is premised on quidditism's chief rival, dispositionalism—and the epiphenomenalism argument. The remainder of this paper defends quidditism by first arguing against dispositionalism and then arguing that the epiphenomenal argument confuses quidditism with a view I call 'quiddityism'. Quiddityism is the view that properties have *quiddities* or *inner natures*, and is not, I argue, equivalent to nor even implied by quidditism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In any case, that is how *I* am using the phrase 'A is necessarily/contingently B'.

<sup>15</sup> See note 9.

<sup>16</sup> Again, the Introduction contains a brief discussion of quiddityism.

## Section Two: Dispositionalism

Realists who reject quidditism often do so on the basis of a certain view about how properties are individuated. That view is called

**Dispositionalism:** What it is for an object to have a given property P is just for it to have a certain disposition—namely, that disposition which is law-like associated with P.

Dispositionalism is a popular thesis these days. Its defenders, to name just a few, include Rom Harré and E. H. Madden (1975), Sydney Shoemaker (1984), Brian Ellis (2001), and George Molnar (2003).<sup>17</sup>

The argument from dispositionalism against quidditism is fairly straightforward. According to dispositionalism, to have *mass* just is to be disposed to resist acceleration and attract other objects with *mass*; to have *positive charge* just is to be disposed to attract objects with *negative charge*, repel objects with *positive charge*, and so on. So which properties might have realized the nomological role of *mass*? Answer: only that property which is the disposition to attract objects with *mass* and resist acceleration—i.e., *mass*. Any other property (that is, any other disposition), would either dispose objects to do things incompatible with realizing the nomological role of mass or else not dispose them to do things required by realizing the nomological role of mass. If this is so, then quidditism is false.

Unfortunately, dispositionalism is an untenable thesis, or so I shall argue. My argument will proceed in two steps. In section four, I show that the only plausible version of dispositionalism is something I call ‘ramsified dispositionalism’. Then, in section five, I

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<sup>17</sup> Chris Swoyer (1982) is often grouped with the other papers on this list. But it seems to me that his paper is better seen as either a defense of ‘ramsified dispositionalism’ (section three of this paper), or ‘quasi-dispositionalism’ (section five).

develop and defend an argument suggested by Denis Robinson (1993) as an argument against ramified dispositionalism. But first, let me briefly discuss two of the more popular arguments against dispositionalism, and why I think they are unsuccessful.

### **Section Three: Two Standard Arguments against Dispositionalism**

There are several arguments against dispositionalism to be found in the literature. Two of these, however, stand out as the most often repeated.

*Always Packing/Never Traveling.* David Armstrong (1984) and C.B. Martin (1993) offer what they call the ‘always packing/never traveling’ argument against dispositionalism.<sup>18</sup> According to the argument, dispositionalism implies that ‘nothing ever happens’. The idea is that if all properties are dispositions, then when a disposition is *manifested*, the manifestation itself is just a change in disposition. But mere changes in dispositions are not genuine events (‘travellings’); rather, they are mere changes in what *could* or *would* happen under certain conditions—they are something’s *getting ready to happen* (‘packings’).

This objection seems to me either unsound or, at best, question-begging. When a flower becomes brittle upon being submerged in liquid nitrogen, surely something happens: the flower *becomes brittle*. Perhaps the response will be that the flower cannot *just* become brittle: this change in disposition is ‘grounded in’, say, a change in molecular structure, which, the response claims, is a non-dispositional change. This response has two problems. First, even if it is true that changes in dispositions must be ‘grounded in’ changes of non-dispositions, this does not show that changes in disposition are not themselves genuine events.<sup>19</sup> Second, this response begs the question against the dispositionalist by assuming that changes in dispositions must be ‘grounded in’ changes of non-dispositions. Since the

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<sup>18</sup> See also Armstrong (2000), (2005) and Martin (1997).

<sup>19</sup> See Mellor (1974, pp. 172 – 173)

dispositionalist flatly denies the existence of non-dispositional properties, she can hardly be expected to accept this assumption.

*Out of Epistemic Reach.* The always packing/never traveling argument has a close connection to (and perhaps its roots in) Richard Swinburne's (1980) epistemological argument against dispositionalism.<sup>20</sup> Swinburne argues that if dispositionalism were true, then we would never be able to recognize the presence of a given property. The central premise of his argument is that we can recognize the presence of a disposition only if we can recognize the typical manifestations of that disposition. Since these manifestations, according to dispositionalism, are just changes in dispositions, we can recognize these manifestations only if we can recognize *their* typical manifestations, and so on. According to Swinburne, the resulting regress is vicious.

I don't challenge the assumption that the resulting regress is vicious. However, I do challenge the central premise of the argument. Consider the property *red*. Suppose it is correct, as some philosophers claim, that to be red is to be disposed to reflect light of such and such wavelength under such and such conditions. Does it follow from this that one cannot recognize when an object is red unless one can recognize when an object reflects light of such and such wavelength under such and such conditions? Clearly not. Consider a child who, upon being appeared to redly, attributes redness to a certain object. He does not have the ability to recognize that the object is reflecting light of such and such wavelength under such and such conditions, but he does have the ability to recognize that the object is red. The lesson is this: disposition recognition does not *always* happen via manifestation recognition; sometimes it happens, so to speak, more directly.

The preceding arguments deserve much more attention than I have space to give them here, as there are no doubt moves that could be made on their behalf. If these moves are successful, then the argument I present over the course of the next two sections should

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, the two arguments are sometimes confused for one another. See, for example, Max Kistler (2002, p. 77, footnote 19).

be seen as offering an *independent* reason to reject dispositionalism. Nevertheless, I hope to have said enough to at least make it plausible that there is a need for a better argument against dispositionalism. That is what I plan to offer.

#### **Section Four: From Dispositionalism to Ramsified Dispositionalism**

Many properties have lawful relations with, roughly speaking, themselves. Suppose we live in a Newtonian world. If so, then *mass* lawfully disposes objects to resist acceleration and attract other objects with *mass*. On the dispositionalist view, *mass* thus simply *is* the disposition to resist acceleration and attract other objects with *mass* (in accordance with Newton's laws). But there is a circularity here. If *mass* is the disposition to resist acceleration and attract other objects with *mass*, then really *mass* is the disposition to resist acceleration and attract other objects with... what? Answer: the disposition to resist acceleration and attract other objects with... what? Answer: the disposition to resist acceleration and attract other objects with... and so on.

Is this circularity vicious? To see that it is, suppose we have two objects with *mass* that attract one another. Why did they attract? The obvious answer is that having *mass* disposes objects to do so. But is this answer available to the dispositionalist? It doesn't seem so: the dispositionalist can say only that each of these objects has the disposition to resist acceleration and attract other objects with... well, with *what*? The *non-*dispositionalist can say 'mass' and leave it at that. But the dispositionalist cannot stop there—for him, *mass* is the disposition to resist acceleration and attract other objects with the disposition to resist acceleration and attract other objects with the disposition to resist acceleration and attract other objects with... So again, why do these two objects with *mass* attract? The dispositionalist cannot say. Thus, the circle implied by dispositionalism is a vicious one, because it makes certain paradigm cases of physical explanation unavailable.

But the game is not up for the dispositionalist. Long ago Frank Ramsey (1929) taught us what to do when faced with such a circle, a method which now bears his name:

we *ramsify*. Rather than say that what it is to have *mass* is, in part, to have the disposition to attract other objects with *mass*, we should say that what it is to have *mass* is to have the property P such that objects with P are disposed to attract other objects with P (and do whatever else it is that object with *mass* are law-like disposed to do).

Notice that ramsified dispositionalism has an answer to the question ‘Why did these two objects with mass attract?’ These two objects attract, on her view, because they both have the property P such that objects with P are disposed to attract other objects with P (and do whatever else it is that objects with *mass* are law-like disposed to do).

There is a sense in which ramsified dispositionalism is not dispositionalism at all: properties on this view are not *identified* with dispositions. Nonetheless, this view captures the spirit of dispositionalism: properties are *individuated* exclusively by the dispositions they confer. In fact, many so-called dispositionalists are more plausibly read as ramsified dispositionalists.<sup>21</sup> In any case, what I take the above argument to show is that dispositionalists would be wise to be ramsified dispositionalists.

### **Section Five: The Symmetry Argument against Ramsified Dispositionalism**

In the previous section I argued that the only plausible version of dispositionalism is ramsified dispositionalism. In this section I argue that ramsified dispositionalism must be rejected.

In (1993), Denis Robinson’s writes

[M]y doubts about Shoemaker/Swoyerism are fuelled by the following kind of case. It seems perfectly possible that there should be a pair of fundamental natural properties f and g differing not at all in their interactions with all other properties, but only in their interactions with one another. Suppose particles could acquire these properties in well-defined circumstances, with a 50% chance of getting either,

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<sup>21</sup> See in particular Swoyer (1982), Shoemaker (1998), and Max Kistler (2002).



and suppose that if two particles both have f, or both have g, they repel each other, whereas if they have one of each they attract each other.

Now the idea that we should identify properties if they satisfy the same laws looks in danger of being unable to deal with this case. Such a condition looks vacuous if we're allowed to assume we can first identify one of these properties and then use the laws to distinguish the other one from it. In other words, it just looks circular if we can presuppose identification of f in order to characterize the nomic profile of g, and vice versa... But if we consider the laws in a Ramseyfied form, and put in an existentially quantified variable for *each* of these properties, the Ramseyfied laws for each of them will show a pair of identical nomic profiles. Thus what distinguishes them is not their differing nomic profiles. (pp. 23 – 4)<sup>22</sup>

In Robinson's example (presumably inspired by the case of *positive charge* and *negative charge*),<sup>23</sup> f confers the disposition to attract objects with g and repel other objects with f and g confers the disposition to attract objects with f and repel objects with g. Thus, according to Ramsified dispositionalism,

To have f is to have the property x such that objects with x are disposed to attract objects with g and repel objects with x.

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<sup>22</sup> Armstrong (2000, p. 9) presents a similar argument but a bit more abstractly.

<sup>23</sup> The way the example is 'inspired by' the case of positive and negative charge. Could it actually *be* the case of positive and negative charge? That depends. First, some alleged 'non-fundamental' laws seem to describe asymmetric roles for positive and negative charge. One such law is that a glass rod becomes *positively charged* when rubbed with cat fur. Of course, one could reject this argument by rejecting such alleged laws as not really laws. But, second, even if one holds that only the absolute most fundamental laws are genuine laws, the jury is simply still out on whether positive and negative charge are symmetric at that level—or so I'm told. (I am indebted to Carl Hoefer for the cat fur example.)

To have g is to have the property x such that objects with x are disposed to attract objects with f and repel objects with x.

Just as in the last section, there is a kind of circularity here. John Hawthorne (2001), however, argues that the circularity can be avoided if we define the two properties *together*.

We avoided circularities in the functional analysis of belief and desire in the philosophy of mind by defining belief and desire together. Perhaps we can do the same in the functional analysis of properties... [Conjoin the sentences for the laws governing all the relevant properties.] Replace each property name by a distinct variable ( $F^1 \dots F^n$ ) and prefix each variable by an [existential] quantifier... Call this the Ramsified lawbook. We can now articulate [Ramsified dispositionalism] very easily, and whatever its merits, we cannot be accused of vicious circularity. Since the variable  $F^1$  replaced A, we can [say that to have A is to have the  $F^1$  such that..., where '...' is replaced by the open sentence you get by dropping the existential quantifier prefixing ' $F^1$ ']. (pp. 369 – 370)

In our case, Hawthorne's idea is as follows. We first conjoin the sentences that express the laws for f and g.

1. Objects with f attract objects with g and repel objects with f, and objects with g attract objects with f and repel objects with g.

We then replace 'f' and 'g' with variables and prefix existential quantifiers.

2. There exists a property x and there exists a property y such that objects with x attract objects with y and repel objects with x, and objects with y attract objects with x and repel objects with y.

We can now get a non-circular answer to our question: what is it to have f? Ramsified dispositionalism can say that to have f is to have

3. The property x such that there exists a property y such that objects with x attract objects with y and repel objects with x, and objects with y attract objects with x and repel objects with y.

But here's the rub: what happens when we ask what is it to have the property g? Ramsified dispositionalism, on Hawthorne's proposal, will say that to have g is to have

4. The property y such that there exists a property x such that objects with x attract objects with y and repel objects with x, and objects with y attract objects with x and repel objects with y.

which is perfectly equivalent to (3). So what is it to have g on the ramsified dispositionalist account? *Exactly* what it is to have f, and so to have g is to have f and to have f is to have g! But that cannot be right: objects with f *repel* objects with f and *attract* objects with g. Hence, there must be a distinction between having f and having g and so ramsified dispositionalism, which seems to imply that there is no such distinction, must be false.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Might the ramsified dispositionalist build more than dispositions into the individuation of properties? Allan Gibbard wondered in conversation whether the ramsified dispositionalist might build facts about *location* into the individuation of properties. If so, then the ramsified dispositionalist has a way of distinguishing the two properties f and g, since f and g are, we will assume, instantiated at different locations (just as positive charge is instantiated at the nuclei of atoms while negative charge is not). However, the price he pays for being able to make this distinction is clearly too high: his view now entails that f and g could not have been instantiated at any locations other than the locations at which they are in fact instantiated.

In considering Robinson's version of the symmetry argument, Black (2000) writes in a footnote that even if the argument is sound, it does not follow that *f* might have realized *g*'s roles or vice versa. Black's point here is that Robinson's argument does not directly imply quidditism. I agree: the symmetry argument does not imply that *f* might have realized *g*'s role,<sup>25</sup> and so it does not *directly* imply quidditism. But we must keep in mind what the symmetry argument is here intended to establish. It is here intended merely as a refutation of ramsified dispositionalism, which, by the argument of the last section, is the only plausible version of dispositionalism, which, as I noted above, forms the major premise of perhaps the most common argument against quidditism. What the argument of this section seeks to show is merely that properties cannot be individuated solely by their nomological roles. If that's right, then ramsified dispositionalism is false, and a common reason for rejecting quidditism is unsound.

### **Section Six: Quasi-dispositionalism**

Note that the symmetry argument does not force us to give-up the idea that properties are *partly* individuated by their nomological roles. Might we then argue against quidditism on the grounds that *part* of what it is to have a given property *P* is to have a certain disposition? In this section I'll argue that we cannot.

Let us call the proposed view of properties

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<sup>25</sup> In fact, it doesn't seem possible for *f* to realize *g*'s role (or vice versa). The role of *g* is being the property *x* such that objects with *x* attract objects with *f* and repel objects with *x*. Hence, if *f* realized *g*'s role, then *f* would be such that objects with *f* attract objects with *f* and repelled objects with *f*. Is this possible? It depends on what we mean when we say that *x*'s attract/repel *y*'s. If we mean that the *net* force between *x*'s and *y*'s in virtue of their being *x*'s and *y*'s is one of attraction/repulsion, then it is not possible for *f*'s to both attract and repel *f*'s.

**Quasi-Dispositionalism:** *Part* of what it is for an object to have a given property P is for it to have a certain disposition—namely the disposition that is law-like associated with P.<sup>26</sup>

Armstrong (2005) and others refer to such a view of properties as a ‘two-sided view’, referring to the dispositional part of a property on the one hand, and whatever else makes up the property on the other. C. B. Martin’s (1993), (1997) view of properties is quasi-dispositionalism:

The dream of either a purely qualitative, non-dispositional or a purely dispositional account of properties is philosophical fantasy. No property is in “pure act”, free of all unfulfilled potency unless it is a property of God (or perhaps the number 2). And no property is only its capacity for the production of further capacities...

It is my suggestion that the properties of entities that are constitutive of any state of affairs must be qualitative as well as dispositional, and dispositional as well as qualitative. (1997: 215 – 6)<sup>27</sup>

On the quasi-dispositionalist view, to have a certain property is to have a certain disposition *and* a certain ‘qualitative nature’.

Quasi-dispositionalism seems to have the resources to avoid the symmetry argument of the last section. Let  $Q_f$  be the qualitative nature that partly constitutes the property  $f$  and let  $Q_g$  be the qualitative nature that partly constitutes the property  $g$ . The quasi-dispositionalist can say that to have  $f$  is to have  $Q_f$  and be disposed to attract objects

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<sup>26</sup> For those of us who think that some parts are wholes, what I really mean by ‘part’ here is *proper part*.

<sup>27</sup> Just after this passage, Martin cites Martin (1994) as a paper where he (first?) puts forward this view of properties. However, this seems to be incorrect. The correct citation, I believe, is (1993). But the confusion doesn’t end there. In Martin (1993), Martin cites Martin (1984) as a paper where he ‘puts forward’ this view. But, as far as I can tell, there is no putting forward, nor even any mention, of such a view in Martin (1984).

with  $Q_g$  and repel objects with  $Q_f$ . Similarly, to have  $g$  is to have  $Q_g$  and be disposed to attract objects with  $Q_f$  and repel objects with  $Q_g$ . There is no circularity here.

However, unlike dispositionalism, quasi-dispositionalism does not motivate rejecting quidditism. In fact, it seems to *imply* quidditism. According to quasi-dispositionalism, *part* but *not all* of what it is to have a certain property is to have a certain disposition. The other part, at least on Martin's two-sided view, is to have a certain 'qualitative nature'. Consider the properties *mass* and *positive charge*. On the two-sided view, to have *mass* is to have a certain disposition  $D_M$  and a certain qualitative character  $Q_M$ , and to have *positive charge* is to have a disposition  $D_{PC}$  and a certain qualitative character  $Q_{PC}$ . Now, as Martin says, it is *essential* to having *mass*, on this view, that an object with *mass* has *both*  $D_M$  and  $Q_M$ . Moreover, assuming that objects have dispositions/qualitative characters only in virtue of having properties that are constituted by those dispositions/qualitative characters, it is also not possible to have  $Q_M$  without having *some* disposition and it is not possible to  $D_M$  without having *some* qualitative nature. However, none of this precludes there being a property, call it 'schmass', that is a sort of recombination of the two halves of *mass* and *positive charge*. More precisely, let schmass be such that to have schmass is to have the disposition  $D_M$  and the qualitative character  $Q_{PC}$ . Now, if objects could have had schmass rather than mass, then the nomological role of mass could have been realized a property other than mass, since that is exactly what schmass would have done. In short, quasi-dispositionalism seems to imply quidditism.

Whether one thinks that quasi-dispositionalism implies quidditism will depend on whether one accepts the principle that possibility is preserved under the sort of recombination mentioned in the previous paragraph.<sup>28</sup> Of course, such a principle is not entailed by quasi-dispositionalism, and so quasi-dispositionalism does not entail quidditism. Nevertheless, such a principle is clearly compatible with quasi-dispositionalism and there doesn't seem to be any reason to deny it: if the two sides of a

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<sup>28</sup> See Armstrong (1989) for a discussion of similar principles of recombination.

property really are *distinct* sides (as opposed to being, say, distinct *ways of conceiving* one and the same thing), then it would seem that there *might have been* a property with some distinct recombination of sides. As far as I know, no quasi-dispositionalists have argued against such a principle of recombination.<sup>29</sup>

Two sections back we saw that dispositionalism proper creates a kind of circularity that undermines certain paradigm cases of physical explanation. One section back we saw that ramsified dispositionalism founders on the symmetry argument. And in this section we saw that quasi-dispositionalism implies, or is at least compatible with quidditism. If all that's so, then there is no sound argument against quidditism from dispositionalism proper, ramsified dispositionalism, or quasi-dispositionalism. This, as far as I know, is an exhaustive list of views on properties that might form the basis of an individuation argument against quidditism. I turn now to defending quidditism against the epiphenomenalism argument.

### **Section Seven: The Epiphenomenalism Argument**

Denis Robinson (1993), Max Kistler (2002), and Ann Whittle (2006) have all charged quidditism with implying a kind of epiphenomenalism.<sup>30</sup> Each of these authors takes this as a reason—perhaps not a conclusive reason—to reject quidditism.<sup>31</sup> I should admit at the outset that I'm not sure I fully understand how Robinson, Kistler, and Whittle intend the epiphenomenalism argument to go. Nevertheless, I shall try my best to capture what these

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<sup>29</sup> Not, at least, while still maintaining quasi-dispositionalism. Martin (1997) appears to ultimately abandon the quasi-dispositionalism of Martin (1993) in favor of a view according to which properties have only *one* side, which can be *conceived* either as disposition or quality. John Heil (2004) defends a similar view.

<sup>30</sup> Robinson, the first to charge quidditism with epiphenomenalism, derived his argument by generalizing an argument from Lewis (1990) against qualia theory. A related argument against qualia theory appears in Lewis (1995).

<sup>31</sup> Robinson in particular seems to think that there are even *stronger* reasons to reject anti-quidditism in favor of quidditism.

authors meant and make the argument as plausible as I can. As we'll see, I have some stake in their being at least *something* right about the epiphenomenalism argument, and so I can hardly be accused of not playing fair.

Here is how I think the argument goes. All parties are agreed that P has (at least contingently) the property of *realizing such and such nomological role*. Now suppose that the event C of some object's having P causes some event E. All parties are agreed (we'll assume) that C causes E in virtue of the fact that P realizes a certain nomological role—that is, in virtue of the fact that P has the second-order property of *realizing such and such nomological role*. Hence, that second-order property is not epiphenomenal in the following sense: the fact that P has the property of *realizing such and such nomological role* is explanatorily relevant to the occurrence of E.

But, goes the argument, if properties are not wholly individuated by their nomological roles, then properties must have some other second-order property in virtue of which they are individuated: an *inner nature*. Authors typically refer to this 'inner nature' as a property's *quiddity*. Now what about quiddities? Is P's *quiddity* explanatory relevant to the occurrence of E. It seems not: there is no need whatsoever to mention the fact that P has a certain quiddity in the explanation of the event E. Hence, the argument concludes, quidditism implies that properties have epiphenomenal second-order properties—namely, quiddities.

Is this implication of epiphenomenalism a reason to reject quidditism? It surely isn't a *decisive* reason. Nevertheless, it seems to me that, all other things being equal, a view that does not imply epiphenomenalism is to be preferred to one that does. So I suggest we think of the epiphenomenalism argument as intended to show this much: all other things being equal, we ought to prefer some alternative to quidditism. If what I've said in the last several sections is correct, all other things are probably not equal between quidditism and its alternatives: dispositionalism and ramsified dispositionalism have serious problems, and quasi-dispositionalism is not an alternative to quidditism at all. Nevertheless, it would be good to deal with the epiphenomenalism argument on its own



terms, to see if it even establishes what it is intended to establish. What I'll argue in the final section of this paper is that it does not: it merely establishes that, all other things being equal, we ought to prefer one version of quidditism to another.

### **Section Eight: Haecceitism without Haecceities, Quidditism without Quiddities**

The epiphenomenalism argument rests squarely on the claim that quidditism requires quiddities. And this is precisely where I shall resist the argument.

It seems that most philosophers have (implicitly) assumed that quidditism requires quiddities. More precisely, philosophers have assumed that if supervenience fails in either direction—properties fail to supervene on their roles *or* roles fail to supervene on properties—then properties must have quiddities.<sup>32</sup> Here is Jonathan Schaffer (2005):

A quiddity is the “suchness” of a property. It is its intrinsic nature. If a property such as charge confers different powers at different worlds, then what unifies these

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<sup>32</sup> In addition to Schaffer (2005), this assumption is more or less transparent in Robinson (1992), Hawthorne (2001), and Whittle (2006). Hawthorne (2001), however, says in footnote 5 that he is “not requiring of the ‘quidditist’ that he be ontologically serious about quiddities, considered as something metaphysically distinct from the properties themselves.” That, I think, is the right thing to say. But, given this qualification, one wonders why Hawthorne ever attributes quiddities to the quidditist in the first place. I think it is because he wants to use what he sees as ‘the best case for thinking that a property’s causal profile exhausts its nature’ as an argument against quidditism (p. 368). The case that Hawthorne makes may or may not be the case under consideration here. Nowhere does he use the term ‘epiphenomenal’, but he does claim that ‘we don’t need quidditive extras to make sense of the world’ and that ‘science seems to offer no conception of negative charge over and above “the thing that plays the charge role”’. Be that as it may, my response to this argument is the same as my response to the epiphenomenalism argument: we have here an argument against quidditism *only if* quidditism requires ‘quidditive extras’. If, as Hawthorne allows, the quidditist ‘need not be ontologically serious about quiddities, considered as something metaphysically distinct from the properties themselves’, then we do not here have a case against quidditism, for surely Hawthorne is not claiming that Science can do without *negative charge* itself.

instances as many instances of one property is their quiddity, their common nature. A quiddity is in some ways... analogous to a haecceity, understood as the “thisness” of an individual. (endnote 2)

I believe it’s a mistake to think that quidditism requires quiddities. To see why, let’s take a moment to consider the analogy between quidditism and haecceitism.

As I said back in section one, quidditism is often introduced on analogy with haecceitism,<sup>33</sup> and I have chosen my definition of ‘quidditism’ to be as analogous as possible to Lewis’s (1986) definition of ‘haecceitism’. Lewis defines ‘haecceitism’ as the view that representation *de re* by possible worlds does not supervene on qualitative representation by possible worlds. More intuitively, and accurately enough for our purposes here, Lewis defines ‘haecceitism’ as the view that the world might have been just like it is *qualitatively* and yet might have differed with respect to which individuals had which qualities.<sup>34</sup> So, for example, the world might have been just as it is qualitatively and yet someone besides me might have had all the qualities that I in fact have.

To see the analogy between quidditism on my definition and haecceitism on Lewis’s definition, think of nomological roles as analogous to qualitative characters and properties as analogous to individuals. Where haecceitism on Lewis’s definition is the view that one and the same qualitative character might have been had by an individual distinct from the individual that actually has it, quidditism on my definition is the view that one and the same nomological role might have been realized by a property distinct from the property that actually realizes it.

Lewis goes at lengths to distinguish haecceitism from some nearby views. In particular, he distinguishes haecceitism from the view that individuals have *haecceities*—

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<sup>33</sup> See *inter alia* Armstrong (1989), Black (2000), Schaffer (2005), and Lewis (2008).

<sup>34</sup> Strictly speaking, Lewis does not define haecceitism as the view that *our* world might have... Rather, he defines haecceitism as the view that *some world* might have... The difference between these definitions need not concern us here.

that is, primitive *thisnesses* in virtue of which individuals are individuated. Lewis contends that haecceitism does not entail that individuals have haecceities. This is precisely analogous to my contention that quidditism does not entail that properties have quiddities—primitive *suchnesses*. In the Introduction I defined ‘quiddityism’ as the view that properties have quiddities. My contention, then, is that quidditism can be had without quiddityism, just as haecceitism can be had without what we might call ‘haecceityism’.

Why would anyone have thought that haecceitism requires haecceities? Here is one possible explanation. Suppose you thought that individuals were exhaustively *constituted* by their properties—that is, suppose you accepted the so-called ‘bundle theory’ of individuals.<sup>35</sup> In that case, it would seem to you that haecceitism requires haecceities: if two distinct bundles of properties (that is, individuals) share all the same qualitative properties, then they must differ with respect to some *non-qualitative thisness*.

However, one need not (and I take this to be Lewis’ point in saying that haecceitism can be had without haecceities) accept such a view of individuals. Suppose you think of individuals as simple, so that they are not constituted by anything. In that case, you’ll think of facts about individuation of individuals as *brute*, and so you won’t acknowledge any properties *in virtue of which* individuals are individuated. Hence, haecceitism can be had without haecceities.

Similarly, why would anyone have thought that quidditism requires quiddities? Here’s one possible explanation. Suppose you thought of properties as exhaustively *constituted* by their second-order properties. Such a view has no name, but let’s dub it the ‘bundle theory of properties’. In that case, it would seem to you that quidditism requires quiddities: if two distinct bundles of second-order properties (that is, properties) share all the same role-concerning second-order properties, then they must differ with respect to some *non-role-involving suchness*.

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<sup>35</sup> See *inter alia* James Van Cleve (1985) and Ted Sider (2006) for discussions of the bundle theory.

However, one need not (and this is my point in saying that quidditism does not require quiddities) accept such a view of properties. Suppose you think of properties as simple, so they are not constituted by anything. In that case, you'll think of facts about individuation of properties as *brute*, and so you won't acknowledge any second-order properties *in virtue of which* properties are individuated. Hence, quidditism can be had without quiddities.

A second-order identity property is a property that, necessarily, one and only one property has. Does the fact that quidditism can be had without quiddities—primitive second-order identity properties in virtue of which properties are individuated—imply that quidditism can be had without second-order identity properties? In a sense 'yes' and in a sense 'no'; it depends on what we mean by 'property'.

In one sense of 'property', properties are cheap: any function from possible worlds to sets of individuals from that world is a first-order property, any function from possible worlds to sets of properties from that world is a second-order property, and so on. In this sense of 'property', quidditism cannot be had without second-order identity properties:<sup>36</sup> for any property P you like, there is a function that takes any possible world and returns the singleton set of P if P exists at that world and returns the empty set if P does not exist at that world. This function is the second-order identity property, in the cheap sense of 'property', of P. However, it seems that implying epiphenomenal properties in this cheap sense of 'property' is no reason at all to reject a theory: we should *expect* such cheap properties to be epiphenomenal.

What's important, I think, is whether a view implies that there are epiphenomenal properties in the more substantial sense of the term 'property'. There is no agreed upon definition of the more substantial sense of 'property', but we can characterize properties in this sense, roughly, as *attributes* or *features* of things. Perhaps we can even go so far as to

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<sup>36</sup> Just as haecceitism cannot be had without first-order identity properties, in the cheap sense of 'property'. See Lewis (1986, p. 225).

say that they are those attributes in virtue of which things resemble one another. Some think that these attributes are ‘universals’ (entities like *squareness* that are ‘wholly present’ at each of their instantiations), others think that they are sets of perfectly resembling ‘tropes’ (entities like *this squareness here* that are present only at the unique place where they are instantiated), still others think that they are ‘abstract forms’ in which things ‘participate’.<sup>37</sup> These disagreements need not concern us here, provided that we have an intuitive idea of what a property in the substantial sense is. Any view that posits the existence of epiphenomenal properties in *this sense*, it seems to me, is suspect. As I said above, this isn’t a decisive reason to reject a theory, but, all other things being equal, we should prefer a theory that does not posit such entities.

Haecceitism without haecceities does not require the existence of identity properties in the more substantial sense, while haecceitism with haecceities does. Haecceities, recall, are second-order properties *in virtue of which* individuals are individuated. If such properties do exist, they would seem to be properties in the substantial sense; otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to do the metaphysical work, so to speak, of individuating individuals. But haecceitism *without* haecceities is consistent with the claim that identity properties are merely properties in the cheap sense. According to haecceitism without haecceities, individuations between individuals are *brute* metaphysical facts—they do not hold *in virtue of* facts involving identity properties. Hence, haecceitism without haecceities does not require identity properties to do any work in individuating the individuals, and so haecceitism without haecceities does not require that identity properties be properties in the substantial sense.

Similarly, quidditism without quiddities does not require the existence of identity properties in the more substantial sense, while quidditism with quiddities does. Quiddities, recall, are second-order properties *in virtue of which* properties are individuated. If such properties do exist, they would seem to have to be properties in the substantial sense;

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<sup>37</sup> See *inter alia* D. C. Williams (1953), Armstrong (1978), and Lewis (1983).

otherwise, they wouldn't be able to do the metaphysical work, so to speak, of individuating properties. But quidditism *without* quiddities is consistent with the claim that second-order identity properties are merely properties in the cheap sense. According to quidditism without quiddities, individuations between properties are *brute* metaphysical facts—they do not hold *in virtue of* facts involving second-order identity properties. Hence, quidditism without quiddities does not require identity properties to do any work in individuating the properties, and so quidditism without quiddities does not require that second-order identity properties be properties in the substantial sense. Thus, the fact that second-order identity properties are epiphenomenal is no reason to reject quidditism without quiddities: as I said above, we should *expect* such cheap properties to be epiphenomenal.

### **Looking Ahead**

This concludes my defense of quidditism. In the next two chapters I will be asking, first, does quidditism imply a kind of skepticism about which properties realize which roles, and, second, what, if any, is the practical significance of this skepticism? I'll argue that the answer to the first question is 'yes', while the answer to the second question is 'none'.

## CHAPTER TWO

### QUIDDITISTIC SKEPTICISM

In the previous chapter I argued in favor of quidditism, the thesis that the nomological roles realized by properties in our world might have been realized by properties other than the ones that actually realize them. In this chapter I will argue that quidditism, together with a certain plausible conceptual/semantic thesis, implies that there are certain facts about the world that we will never know—namely, facts about *which* properties realize the nomological roles. Let's call this skeptical thesis 'quiddistic skepticism'.

The argument I will be defending in this chapter is not my own. It was originally put forth by David Lewis in his posthumously published paper 'Ramseyan Humility' (2008). Of the three published responses to Lewis's essay (Langton 2004; Schaffer 2005; Whittle 2006), each argues that even if we accept Lewis's metaphysical assumption (quidditism), we need not accept his epistemic conclusion (quiddistic skepticism). My aim in this chapter is to develop and defend Lewis's argument against these critics.

Ann Whittle claims that the argument for quiddistic skepticism rests on an implausibly strong account of *identification*—namely, that to identify *x*, one must be able to distinguish *x* from all other actual and possible entities. Accordingly, Whittle attempts to refute quiddistic skepticism by an appeal to a more lenient account of identification. In what follows I defend Lewis by showing that Lewis's demanding account of identification is a good account of at least one perfectly legitimate sense of 'identification'.

Jonathan Schaffer and Rae Langton each claim that quiddistic skepticism rests on an implausibly strong account of *knowledge*—namely, non-contextual infallibilism. In this way they see quiddistic skepticism as akin to traditional, external-world skepticism. Accordingly, Schaffer and Langton attempt to refute quiddistic skepticism by appealing to more lenient epistemic principles. In what follows I defend Lewis, not by defending non-

contextual infallibilism, but by showing that even on the alternative epistemic principles of Schaffer and Langton, Lewis's conclusion still follows.

In this chapter an all-important difference between quiddistic and traditional, external-world skepticism will begin to emerge. Here we will see that this difference has important implications for what it takes to *refute* one or the other of these skepticisms. But in the next chapter we will see that this difference also has important implications for which of these skepticisms has *practical significance*.

### **Section One: The Argument for Quiddistic Skepticism**

In the Introduction I gave the following gloss on the argument for quiddistic skepticism.

Empirical inquiry can tell us which nomological roles are realized, but if there are *further* facts about which properties realize those roles—that is, facts above and beyond the mere facts about which roles are realized—then those facts are beyond the realm of empirical inquiry. Let us call these worrisome sorts of facts, if there are any, 'quiddistic facts'. Now according to quidditism, there *are* quiddistic facts, because quidditism is the view that properties 'come apart from' their roles. But quiddistic facts are contingent facts about our world and, hence, if they are beyond the realm of empirical inquiry, then they are simply unknowable.

It's time to turn this gloss into a proper argument. I shall reconstruct Lewis's argument in five stages.

*The Stage-setting Stage.* Let T be a true and complete final theory of our world. Lewis claims that the language of T can be divided into two parts: the terms that have meaning independently of T (the 'O-terms') and the terms that are implicitly defined by T (the 'T-terms'). Writing T as a single sentence and replacing the T-terms with variables, we get the realization formula of T—the open sentence ' $T(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$ '. Any n-tuple of



properties that *could have* satisfied the realization formula of T is called a ‘possible realization of T’; any n-tuple of properties that *does* satisfy the realization formula of T is called an ‘actual realization of T’.

To make this concrete, suppose (absurdly) that the final theory T is just the sentence ‘Objects with mass attract one another’. Now suppose that ‘mass’ is a term that is implicitly defined by this theory. The realization formula of T is thus the open sentence ‘Objects with x attract one another’. Now suppose that, in fact, objects with property P attract one another. Then <P> is the actual realization of T. Now suppose that it *could have been* that objects with Q attract one another. Then <Q> is a possible realization of T.

*The Metaphysical/Linguistic Stage.* Lewis assumes that there is a realization of T. He further assumes that if expressions of the O-language refer to the properties that realize T, it is only via descriptions of their nomological roles.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Lewis assumes quidditism—the thesis that for any property P and its nomological role R, R might have been realized by a property other than P.<sup>39,40</sup> Given these assumptions, it follows that, in

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<sup>38</sup> Actually, Lewis assumes that if the O-language refers to the properties that realize T, it is only via descriptions of their nomological/*locational* roles in nature.

<sup>39</sup> Given what I said in footnote 38, what Lewis actually needs to assume here is something a bit stronger than quidditism—he needs the thesis that for any property P and its nomological/*locational* role R, R might have been realized by some property other than P. But if we accept quidditism, I can’t see any reason to not accept this slightly stronger thesis.

<sup>40</sup> In fact, the definition of ‘quidditism’ cited by Lewis is not the one I have given here, but that of Black (2000). Moreover, Lewis’s argument for the existence of a merely possible realization of T is not the one I have given here. He actually gives two distinct arguments: the permutation argument and the argument from idlers/aliens. The permutation argument says that given quidditism (on Black’s definition), any permutation of the actual realization of T (which respects their category and adicity) is a possible realization of T. The argument from idlers/aliens says that given quidditism (on Black’s definition), T might have been realized by idlers—properties that are instantiated at our world but realize no nomological roles—or aliens—properties that are not instantiated at our world.

But these arguments face some serious problems. Both arguments face the problem that it is less than clear exactly what Black’s definition of ‘quidditism’ amounts to, whether it is acceptable, and whether it

addition to the actual realization of T, there is some *merely possible* realization of T.

*The Evidential Stage.* Lewis assumes that the O-language of T suffices to describe all possible observations. Now consider the Ramsey sentence of T— $\exists x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n T(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$ . Since the Ramsey sentence of T implies all and only the O-language sentences of T, it follows from the above assumption that for any possible world  $w$  such that the proposition expressed by the Ramsey sentence of T is true at  $w$ ,  $w$  will never be eliminated by—that is, inconsistent with—our observational evidence. From this and the conclusion of the metaphysical/linguistic stage it follows that there is some possibility in which T is realized that will never be eliminated by our evidence, and yet the properties that realize T in that possibility are not the properties that actually realize T.

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implies what Lewis here takes it to imply (see the Introduction). Moreover, each argument faces its own special problem.

The permutation argument has the problem that it must assume that T is *uniquely* realized in the actual world, or, somewhat weaker, that it is not actually realized by any permutations of one of its realizations. But how is Lewis entitled to this assumption? If ‘positive charge’ and ‘negative charge’ turn out to play perfectly symmetrical roles in the final theory, then if the final theory has  $a$  realization, it will also be realized by a permutation of that realization—namely, the one that swaps the properties satisfying the positive and negative charge roles.

The argument from idlers/aliens faces a different sort of difficulty. Here Lewis assumes that since we do not know that there are *not* idlers/aliens, it follows that we do not know that his argument does *not* establish quidditistic skepticism (assuming for the moment that the rest of the argument is sound), and so we do not know which properties realize T (2008: 213 - 214). The trouble here is that Lewis is assuming a sort of KK principle: if we do not know that we know which properties realize T, then we do not know which properties realize T. But many accounts of knowledge violate that principle. In fact, Lewis’s *own* account of knowledge violates that principle (see the next paragraph). What matters for knowing that P, on Lewis’s account, is not whether you *know that* your evidence eliminates all possibilities in which not-P, but, rather, *that* your evidence eliminates all possibilities in which not-P. If there are no possibilities in which T is not realized by the actual realization(s) of T, then our evidence trivially eliminates all possibilities in which T is not realized by the actual realization(s) of T. It then follows, on Lewis’s account of knowledge, that we know which properties realize T, even if we do not *know* that we know which properties realize T.

*The Knowledge-that Stage.* Although Lewis doesn't say so, the most straightforward way to get from the conclusion of the evidential stage to quiddistic skepticism is via Lewis's own account of knowledge. In (1999) Lewis defends the following infallibilist account of knowledge: *S* knows that *P* iff *S*'s evidence eliminates all possibilities in which not-*P* (psst!—see this note)<sup>41</sup>. This analysis, together with the conclusion of the last stage of the argument, implies that we will never know *p*, where *p* is the proposition that is true at all and only those worlds where the actual realization of *T* is the realization of *T*.<sup>42</sup>

*The Knowledge-which Stage.* The final stage of the argument takes us from the claim that we will never know that *p* to the claim that we will never know *which* *n*-tuple of properties realizes *T*. As in the last stage of the argument, Lewis leaves the key assumption here implicit, but the path seems clear. We simply assume what Jonathan Schaffer (2007) calls the 'Standard Analysis of knowing-*wh*', according to which *S* knows-*wh* (*who*, *which*, *what*, etc) iff *S* knows *P*, where *P* is the true answer to the indirect question of the *wh*-clause. Assuming that *p* (from the previous stage) is the true answer to the question 'Which *n*-tuple of properties realizes *T*?' it follows from the conclusion of the knowledge-that stage that we will never know which *n*-tuple of properties realizes *T*.

At the heart of this argument is quidditism, which I defended in Chapter One. But Whittle, Schaffer, and Langton all argue that even if quidditism is correct, quiddistic skepticism does not follow. We have just seen that quiddistic skepticism *does follow* if we assume

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<sup>41</sup> I here allows Lewis's contextualist *sotto voce* proviso ("Psst!—except for the possibilities that we are properly ignoring") to remain *sotto voce*. As I argue below, the appeal to contextualism won't help in blocking the argument for Humility.

<sup>42</sup> Here and henceforth I follow Lewis in assuming that propositions are sets of possible worlds (or, more generally, sets of *possibilia*). No doubt much of what I say in this paper would need to be revised to take on the assumption that propositions are more finely individuated.

Lewis's infallibilist account of knowledge and the standard account of knowing-*wh*.<sup>43</sup> But Whittle, Schaffer, and Langton are by no means obliged to grant these accounts. After all, the account of knowledge is an *infallibilist* account and the account of knowing-*wh*, at least as it is used here, is a quite strong one. Accordingly, we might have expected these accounts to imply some serious epistemic depravity. The interesting question, then, is whether quidditism implies quiddistic skepticism on more *lenient* epistemic principles. This is exactly the question that these authors address, and they all answer it in the negative. We will look at their arguments, and why I think they're wrong, in a moment. For now, we must pause to clear something up.

## **Section Two: Trivial Knowledge and Two-dimensions of Intension**

In the last section I argued that Lewis's thesis that we will never know which properties realize T is equivalent to the thesis that we will never know *p*, where *p* is the proposition that is true at all and only those possible worlds where the actual realization of T is the realization of T. Now this may seem a bit odd, for this is just the thesis that

(1) We will never know that the actual realization of T is the realization of T.

But how could (1) possibly be true? What could be easier than knowing that the actual F is the F? Which other F could it be?!

This response hinges on an ambiguity in (1). The ambiguity concerns which proposition is expressed by the embedded sentence 'the actual realization of T is the realization of T'. One way to understand the ambiguity is with the resources of 'non-

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<sup>43</sup> More accurately: it follows if we take the standard account of knowledge-*wh* and *the invariantist's version* of Lewis's infallibilism. See note 39 above and section five below.

ambitious' two-dimensional semantics.<sup>44</sup> There are many versions of two-dimensional semantics, but only the general idea is needed here. This is the idea that at least some statements have two intensions: a C-intension and an A-intension.<sup>45</sup> The A-intension of a statement, roughly, is the proposition that is true at all and only those worlds *considered as actual* where the statement is true ('A' for 'actual'). The C-intension, on the other hand, is the proposition that is true at all and only those worlds *considered as counterfactual* where the statement is true ('C' for 'counterfactual').

Let's take an example. Consider the statement 'The actual US president is the US president'. Now consider a world  $w_1$  where the US president is Al Gore. Is the statement 'The actual US president is the US president' true at  $w_1$ ? Well, that depends on whether we're considering  $w_1$  as actual or as counterfactual. Consider it first as counterfactual. In other words, ask yourself what would have been true had Al Gore been the US president. In particular, ask yourself if the actual US president would have been the US president. The answer, it seems, is 'no'—the actual president, George W. Bush, would not have been the president had Al Gore been the president. But now consider  $w_1$  as actual. In other words, ask yourself what is true if Al Gore *is* the US president. In particular, ask yourself if the actual US president is the US president if Al Gore is the US president. The answer in this case, it seems, is 'yes'. Thus, the A-intension and C-intension of 'The actual US president is the US president' are not identical: the former is true at  $w_1$  but the latter is not.

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<sup>44</sup>. The 'nonambitious' qualifier on two-dimensional semantics comes from Soames 2005. The two-dimensionalism appealed to here is non-ambitious in that it claims only that *some* statements (in particular, those containing the term "actually") have two intensions (please see the next note).

<sup>45</sup>. The labels 'C-intension' and 'A-intension' are the ones used by Frank Jackson in his particular version of two-dimensional semantics (inter alia, Jackson 1998). In other versions, different labels have been used. My choice to use Jackson's labels should not be taken as an endorsement of his particular view of two-dimensional semantics. Indeed, nothing more than the relatively conservative two-dimensionalism of Davies and Humberstone (1980) is required for what I say here.

The same thing happens in the case of ‘The actual realization of T is the realization of T’. The A-intension of this statement is true at all and only those worlds where T is uniquely realized, regardless of which properties realize it at that world. This is simply because for any world  $w$  where T is uniquely realized, the statement ‘The actual realization of T is the realization of T’ is true at  $w$  considered as actual. However, the C-intension of ‘The actual realization of T is the realization of T’ is not true at every world where T is uniquely realized. In particular, it is false at any world where T does not have the same realization that it does in this (the actual) world. This allows us to explain the ambiguity in (1). If the embedded statement in (1) expresses its A-intension, then (1) is false, provided only that we will come to know that T is uniquely realized. However, only if the embedded statement in (1) expresses its C-intension is (1) equivalent to Lewis’ thesis.

This concludes my reconstruction of Lewis’s thesis and his argument for it. I turn now to the criticisms and my defense.

### **Section Three: Whittle’s Response to Humility**

Ann Whittle (2006) argues that even if Lewis’s metaphysical assumptions are correct, ‘we can [still] know which property occupies a certain role, because we are able to identify the property in question’ (p. 469). I disagree.

Whittle’s argument explicitly assumes a version of Russell’s principle: being able to identify A is having ‘discriminating knowledge’ of A, where one has discriminating knowledge of A if one has a description that uniquely picks out A. Thus, since we can uniquely pick out the property that realizes such-and-such role with the description ‘the property that realizes such-and-such role’, it follows by Whittle’s version of Russell’s principle that we can identify the property that realizes such and such role.

The first thing to notice about Whittle’s version of Russell’s principle is just how *cheap* it makes identification. An example should make this clear. Suppose we’re in a courtroom and I’m on the stand. An attorney asks me, ‘Do you know which person stole

your chicken?’ Suppose that all I know about the person who stole my chicken is that the person who stole my chicken is the person who stole my chicken. However, it turns out that there is a unique person who stole my chicken. It follows by Whittle’s version of Russell’s principle that I can *identify* the person who stole my chicken, since I have a description that uniquely picks out the person who stole my chicken.

Clearly Lewis had a stronger notion of ‘identification’ in mind when he stated his thesis. Whittle agrees. She writes, ‘Lewis, however, seems to think that something more is required: that we be able to single out the entity from all other actual *and possible* entities’ (470). But she goes on to argue that

[S]uch a condition on identification seems too strong. Suppose, for instance, that I am a historian who knows all there is to know about Napoleon and this knowledge, we can safely assume, allows me to single out one person in history, namely Napoleon. Granted a certain view about the transworld identities of particulars, namely Haecceitism, this exhaustive knowledge of Napoleon would, nevertheless, fail to identify him. Why? Haecceitism states that two possibilities can differ just in the permutation of individuals. So everything could be qualitatively identical in two possible worlds, yet those worlds differ in that the person we name ‘Napoleon’ instantiates all the same properties that Nelson does in this world, and vice versa. (*ibid*)

Whittle’s mistake, it seems to me, is searching for *one* (or perhaps a *few*) notions that deserve the title ‘identification’. As many theorists have noted, expressions such as ‘identification’, ‘knowing what’, and ‘knowing which’ are all highly context-sensitive.<sup>46</sup> In (1995), Lewis himself notes that in addition to all the common and less demanding senses of these expressions, there is ‘an uncommonly demanding and literal sense’ (142).

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Aloni (2005), Gerbrandy (1997), and van Rooy (2003).

Moreover, Lewis explicitly notes (2008: 215 and endnote 20) that it is this ‘uncommonly demanding sense’ that he has in mind when he says that we will never know which properties realize T.

How does this fit with my reconstruction of Lewis’s argument above? I stated that according to the standard analysis of *knowledge-which*, S knows-which is the F iff S knows P, where P is the true answer to the question ‘Which is the F?’. The different senses of ‘knows-which’ (or of ‘identification’) can be modeled using this analysis by varying what counts as the true answer to ‘Which is the F?’. If we want a more demanding sense, we simply require that only more specific propositions count as answers to ‘Which is the F?’. Taking this process to its limit, we get the ‘uncommonly demanding and literal sense’ of knowing-which. In this sense of knowing-which, to know-which is to know the maximally specific answer to the question. In our case, the question is ‘Which possible realization of T is the realization of T?’ Assuming that  $\langle P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n \rangle$  is that actual realization of T, the maximally specific answer to our question is simply the proposition that  $\langle P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n \rangle$  realizes T. And, by the knowledge-that stage of Lewis’s argument, this is a proposition that we will never know.<sup>47</sup>

In any case, whether or not Lewis is correct to state his thesis in terms of ‘knowing which’ or ‘identification’—that is, whether the knowledge-which stage of Lewis’s argument is sound—the more interesting question would seem to be whether the argument through the knowledge-that stage is sound. After all, the knowledge-that stage itself concludes with a claim about our irremediable ignorance. Let us then move on to a discussion of Schaffer (2005) and Langton (2004), whose criticisms appear to be directed precisely at this earlier stage of the argument.

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<sup>47</sup> I should note that Whittle does believe that *some* epistemic conclusion follows from Lewis’s argument—namely, that we do not know the ‘intrinsic natures’ of the properties that realize T. But that it is to pair quidditism with the uncomfortable thesis that properties *have* ‘intrinsic natures’. See the Introduction and Chapter One for my explanation of why that can and ought to be avoided.



#### **Section Four: This Ain't Your Daddy's Skepticism**

In 'Quiddistic Knowledge' (2005), Jonathan Schaffer argues that quiddistic skepticism 'is just a species of skepticism about the external world' and that, therefore, 'whatever answer one offers to skepticism about the external world will thereby answer quiddistic skepticism' (p. 19).

I believe that Schaffer is wrong about quiddistic skepticism: it is not 'just a species of skepticism about the external world'. Moreover, I believe that the way in which quiddistic skepticism differs from traditional external-world skepticism is precisely what makes quiddistic skepticism *immune* to nearly all of the typical responses to traditional external-world skepticism.<sup>48</sup> Let me first illustrate the difference between quiddistic skepticism and traditional skepticism by discussing two of Schaffer's attempts to apply a standard response to traditional skepticism to quiddistic skepticism. After I discuss these responses, I'll attempt to state in somewhat more precise terms the difference between quiddistic skepticism and traditional skepticism and why most standard responses to the latter will be unsuccessful responses to the former.

*Deductionism (aka the Moorean 'common sense' response)*

Consider what Schaffer calls the 'deductionist' response to external-world skepticism, which takes the following form.

- (2) I know that  $p$  (by common sense).
- (3) If I know that  $p$ , then I am in a position to know that  $q$ .
- (4) Therefore, I am in a position to know that  $q$ .

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<sup>48</sup> However, I do believe that Schaffer is right in that *one* of the responses to external-world skepticism (direct realism) does stand a chance at refuting quiddistic skepticism. I will discuss this potentially successful response in section 6.

where  $p$  entails  $q$ . If we add to the above argument the assumption that I have deduced  $q$  from  $p$ , it follows that I know that  $q$ .

To take a particular example, the deductionist might respond to the brain-in-a-vat skeptic as follows:

- (5) I know that I have hands (by common sense).
- (6) If I know that I have hands, then I am in a position to know that I am not a handless brain in a vat.
- (7) Therefore, I am in a position to know that I am not a handless brain in a vat.

Might we offer a deductionist response to quiddistic skepticism? Schaffer thinks so.

[Just] as the deductionist claims that by starting with one's knowledge that one has hands, one can come to know that the external world is real, so she should claim that by starting with one's knowledge that, for instance, this brick has mass, one can come to know the quiddities. The same deductive moves are available in both cases (2005: 21).

So Schaffer thinks that the deductionist should offer something like the following reply to quiddistic skepticism:

- (8) I know that this brick has mass (by commons sense).
- (9) If I know that this brick has mass, then I am in a position to know that mass realizes the mass role.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> When I speak of 'the mass role', I mean the role of being the  $i^{\text{th}}$  member of the realization of T, where 'mass' is the  $i^{\text{th}}$  T-term in the postulate of T. If 'mass' is not a T-term of T, then Schaffer's example will need to be adjusted accordingly.

(10) Therefore, I am in a position to know that mass realizes the mass role.

Will this line of argument work? If so, it must be ‘common sense’ that I know that this brick has mass. Suppose, on the deductionist’s behalf, that it is common sense that I know that this brick has mass. What proposition do I thus know?

I stated earlier that T implicitly defines the T-terms. According to Lewis (1970, 1972, 2008), a T-term  $t_i$  is equivalent to the definite description ‘the  $x_i$  such that there exist unique  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$  such that  $T(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_i, \dots, x_n)$ ’—for short, ‘the property that realizes the  $t_i$  role’. Such definitions are commonly known as ‘Ramsey-style definitions’. Here is one variation of the story that Lewis often told to motivate the idea that T-terms have Ramsey-style definitions:

We are assembled in the drawing room of the country house; the detective reconstructs the crime. That is, he proposes a *theory* designed to be the best explanation of the phenomena we have observed: the death of Mr. Body, the blood on the wallpaper, the silence of the dog in the night, the clock seventeen minutes fast, and so on. He launches into his story:

*X*, *Y* and *Z* conspired to murder Mr. Body. Seventeen years ago, in the gold fields of Uganda, *X* was Body’s partner... Last week, *Y* and *Z* conferred in a bar in Reading... Tuesday night at 11:17, *Y* went to the attic and set a time bomb... Seventeen minutes later, *X* met *Z* in the billiard room and gave him the lead pipe... Just when the bomb went off in the attic, *X* fired three shots into the study through the French windows...

And so it goes: a long story. Let us pretend that it is a long conjunctive sentence.

The story contains three names, ‘*X*’, ‘*Y*’ and ‘*Z*’. The detective uses the new terms without explanation, as though we knew what they meant. But we do not. We never used them before, at least not in the senses they bear in the present

context. All we know about their meanings is what we gradually gather from the story itself. Call these... *T-terms*... because they are introduced by a theory. Call the rest of the terms in the story *O-terms*...

In telling his story, the detective set forth three roles and said that they were occupied by *X*, *Y* and *Z*. He must have specified the meanings of the three T-terms '*X*', '*Y*' and '*Z*' thereby; for they had meanings afterwards, they had none before, and nothing else was done to give them meanings. They were introduced by an implicitly functional definition, being reserved to name the occupants of the three roles...

If, as I claim, the T-terms are definable as naming the first, second and third occupants of the unique triple that realizes the story, then the T-terms can be treated like definite descriptions... (1972: 249 – 252)

And just in case you are thinking that the descriptions merely *fix* the referents of the T-terms, without actually giving their semantic contents, Lewis goes on to say

If the story is uniquely realized, they name what they ought to name; if the story is unrealized or multiply realized, they are like improper descriptions. If too many triples realize the story, '*X*' is like 'the moon of Mars'; if too few triples—none—realize the story, '*X*' is like 'the moon of Venus'. Improper descriptions are not meaningless. Hillary Putnam has objected that on this sort of account of theoretical terms, the theoretical terms of a falsified theory come out meaningless [(Putnam 1962)]. But they do not, if theoretical terms of unrealized theories are like improper descriptions. 'The moon of Mars' and 'The moon of Venus' do not (in any way) name anything here in our actual world; but they are not meaningless, because we know very well what they name in certain alternative possible worlds. (*ibid*, 252 – 253)

If Lewis's semantics of T-terms is correct, and if 'mass' is a T-term, then 'mass' is equivalent to the definite description 'the property that realizes the mass role'.<sup>50</sup> Let us then reconstruct the deductionist's argument in (8), (9), and (10) in light of this equivalence.

(8\*) I know that this brick has the property that realizes the mass role (by common sense).

(9\*) If I know that this brick has the property that realizes the mass role, then I am in a position to know that the property that realizes the mass role is the property that realizes the mass role.

(10\*) Therefore, I am in a position to know that the property that realizes the mass role is the property that realizes the mass role.

According to (10\*), what I am in a position to know is that *some unique* property realizes the mass role. But quiddistic skepticism is the thesis that we will never know *which* property (in the demanding sense) realizes the mass role—that is, we will never know the proposition that is true at all and only those worlds where the property that *actually* realizes the mass role is the property that realizes the mass role.

What about rigidifying our descriptions? Consider

(8\*\*) I know that this brick has the property that *actually* realizes the mass role (by commons sense).

(9\*\*) If I know that this brick has the property that actually realizes the mass role, then I am in a position to know that the property that actually realizes the mass role is the property that realizes the mass role.

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<sup>50</sup> This isn't circular, just shorthand. Please see the previous note.

(10\*\*) Therefore, I am in a position to know that the property that actually realizes the mass role is the property that realizes the mass role.

The conclusion of this argument (10\*\*) indeed contradicts quiddistic skepticism, but *only* if we read the sentence containing the definite description ‘the property that actually realizes the mass role’ as expressing its C-intensions (see section 3 above). Is this a move the deductionist can make? I don’t think so: in that case the plausibility that the first premise is ‘common sense’ has gone right out the window. What *is* common sense (if anything here is) is that we know that this brick has mass, which, by Lewis’s semantics for T-terms, is knowing that this brick has the property that realizes the mass role, it is not knowing that this brick has P (where ‘P’ names the property that realizes the mass role).

*Abductionism (aka inference to the best explanation)*

The abductionist response to external-world skepticism claims that (1) the hypothesis that there is an external world is a better explanation of our experiences than the hypothesis that, say, we are dreaming and (2) if P is the best explanation of one’s experiences, then one can come to know that P by an *inference to the best explanation*. Schaffer claims that the abductionist ought to have a parallel response to quiddistic skepticism: ‘[Just] as the abductionist claims that skeptical scenarios constitute poor explanations of the appearances, so she should claim that quiddity swapping scenarios constitute more complex, less conservative, or at least somehow inferior explanations of the powers’ (2005: 22). In a footnote to this passage, Schaffer admits that the abductionist will have a difficult time making the case that the ‘quiddity swapping’ scenarios (i.e., the alternative realization scenarios) constitute inferior explanations of the powers. However, he seems to be suggesting that since these same difficulties arise for the abductionist response to traditional skepticism, there is no special difficulty for the abductionist response to quiddistic skepticism.

I disagree. Although there are difficulties for the abductionist's claim that the normal external-world hypothesis is a better explanation of our experiences than the skeptical hypothesis, at least in that case one can *distinguish* various features of the competing hypotheses that then figure in the arguments for which is the better explanation. For example, the external-world hypothesis postulates the existence of many things outside of our minds, whereas the dreaming hypothesis does not. But are there any such distinguishing features of the competing hypotheses in the case of quiddistic skepticism?

Let  $R_1$  and  $R_2$  be two possible realizations of  $T$ , such that the first and second members of  $R_1$  are permuted in  $R_2$ . Now consider  $H_1$ , the hypothesis that  $R_1$  realizes  $T$  and  $H_2$ , the hypothesis that  $R_2$  realizes  $T$ . What are the distinguishing features of  $H_1$  and  $H_2$ ? Well, simply the fact that according to  $H_1$ ,  $R_1$  realizes  $T$  whereas according to  $H_2$ ,  $R_2$  realizes  $T$ . Is this difference between  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  relevant to which is the better explanation? There seems to be absolutely no way to tell, and the reason for this is a fact about our limited *grasp* on these two hypotheses.

If  $R_1$  is the actual realization of  $T$ , it may seem that we can represent  $H_1$  with the sentence ' $\langle t_1, t_2, \dots, t_n \rangle$  realizes  $T(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$ ', where this sentence *uses* each  $T$ -term ' $t_i$ '. But if we learned our lesson from above, then we'll know that that won't do the trick. According to Lewis, the sentence just mentioned is equivalent to the sentence 'the  $n$ -tuple that realizes  $T$  is the  $n$ -tuple that realizes  $T$ '. This sentence is trivial (save its existential and uniqueness presuppositions) and obviously does not express the hypothesis  $H_1$ . What we'll have to do, if we want to use some sentence like the above to represent  $H_1$ , is *rigidify* our descriptions. Thus, the sentence 'the  $n$ -tuple that *actually* realizes  $T$  is the  $n$ -tuple that realizes  $T$ ' manages to express the hypothesis  $H_1$ . Similarly, the sentence 'the  $n$ -tuple formed by permuting the first and second members of the  $n$ -tuple that *actually* realizes  $T$  realizes  $T$ ' manages to express the hypothesis  $H_2$ .

Our question, remember, is whether  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  have any distinguishing features such that we can infer to  $H_1$  on the grounds that it is a better explanation than  $H_2$ . But now it should be fairly clear that we do not have a rich enough grasp on these two hypothesis to

be in a position to know what the relevant differences between them are. As Lewis would say, our rigidified descriptions enable us to represent the hypotheses in question but only in such a way that we are ‘blinded’ to their distinguishing features.<sup>51</sup>

Consider the detective in Lewis’s story above. Suppose that Jack actually realizes the X role and that Bridget actually realizes the Y role. Now suppose that the *only* means that the detective has of representing the hypothesis that Jack realizes the X role and Bridget realizes the Y role is with the sentence ‘The person who actually realizes the X role realizes the X role and the person who actually realizes the Y role realizes the Y role’. Can the detective thus infer that proposition (over the proposition that Mary realizes the X role and John the Y role) by an inference to the best explanation? On pain of allowing too much knowledge too easily, we had better say ‘no’. Through his ineliminable use of rigidified descriptions, the detective is blinded to any features of that hypothesis that makes it a better explanation than the alternative. The same goes for us in the case quiddistic skepticism.

### *The diagnosis*

At this point we should be asking ourselves questions along the following lines. Don’t we, or might we someday, have a language rich enough to express the true hypothesis about which properties realize T *without* the use of blind rigidification? If so, couldn’t we then infer to that proposition via inference to the best explanation? Moreover, if we have such a language, then perhaps it contains some sentence *S*, such that it will be common sense that we know *S* (here *S* is used) and such that *S* expresses the proposition that this brick has the property that actually realizes the mass role. If so, couldn’t we then deduce the proposition that Lewis claims we don’t know?

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<sup>51</sup> We can of course distinguish the hypotheses in trivial ways such as *the proposition expressed by such and such sentence vs the proposition expressed by such and such other sentence*. But I take it that those distinctions are irrelevant to which is the better explanation.



The crux of the matter is whether we have or ever will have a language that is expressive enough to rigidly refer to the properties that realize T *without* the use of rigidified descriptions or expressions that are equivalent to rigidified descriptions. Lewis seems committed to saying ‘no’. The theory T, recall, is supposed to be the ‘true and complete final theory of our world’. It would thus seem that the language of T is as expressive of a language as we will ever have. And by Lewis’ assumption that the language of T is not expressive enough to rigidly refer to the properties that realize T *without* the use of rigidified descriptions, it seems to follow that we will never have a language that it is that expressive.

In my opinion, it is no accident that Lewis’s paper is titled ‘*Ramseyan Humility*’, rather than, say, ‘*Quiddistic Skepticism*’. Lewis calls quiddistic skepticism ‘*Ramseyan Humility*’ because it’s due to a certain (alleged) fact about our language—namely, that our only terms for the fundamental properties that realize T have Ramsey-style definitions. This, I believe, is really what distinguishes quiddistic skepticism from traditional, external world skepticism. In the case of traditional skepticism, we have a non-trivial *grasp* on the relevant alternative possibilities. But in the case of quiddistic skepticism, our only means of distinguishing the relevant possibilities is with blindly-rigidified definite descriptions. This is why most standard responses to traditional skepticism will fail as responses to quiddistic skepticism.

### *Contextualism*

Before moving on, I’d like to test the hypothesis I introduced in the previous paragraph. Let’s look at one more standard response to traditional skepticism—contextualism—and see if it too fails as a response to quiddistic skepticism for the reason I just mentioned.

When I gave Lewis’s analysis of knowledge above, I left out his famous *sotto voce* proviso. Here is Lewis’s analysis in its entirety:

**Lewisian Knowledge:** S knows that P if and only if S's evidence eliminates all possibilities in which not-P—Psst!—except for those possibilities that we are properly ignoring (Lewis 1999: 425).

Lewis argues that, in certain contexts, we can truly be said to 'know' (as uttered in those contexts) that we have hands, because we are properly ignoring all the possibilities in which we don't have hands that our evidence does not eliminate (e.g., the possibility of being a handless-brain-in-a-vat).

Can we make this sort of response to quiddistic skepticism? Again, Schaffer thinks so: '[Just] as the contextualist allows that claims to know that one has hands count as true when skeptical scenarios are not salient, so she should allow that claims to know which properties exist count as true when quiddity-swapping scenarios are not salient' (2005: 23). Rae Langton (2004) agrees:

If Lewis shows us how we can 'properly ignore' the skeptical possibility, perhaps the same strategy could show us how we can 'properly ignore' [the alternative realization possibilities]. The good news for my reader, then, is that your knowledge of things in themselves may be safe—at least as far as the argument for Ramseyan Humility is concerned. (134–135)

Unfortunately, we're about to see that a contextualist response to quiddistic skepticism doesn't have much plausibility. Lewis's brand of contextualism, in particular, is committed to this being the case. Here is Lewis's explanation of why we do not know that a given lottery ticket will lose, no matter how low the odds (a version of the so-called lottery paradox).

Suppose one possibility saliently resembles another. Then if one of them may not be properly ignored, neither may the other. . . . It is the Rule of Resemblance that

explains why you do not know that you will lose the lottery, no matter what the odds are against you and no matter how sure you should therefore be that you will lose. For every ticket, there is the possibility that it will win. These possibilities are saliently similar to one another: so either every one of them may be properly ignored, or else none may. But one of them may not properly be ignored: the one that actually obtains [by Lewis's Rule of Actuality]. (1999: 429–430)

(Lewis also uses the Rule of Resemblance to explain why the subjects of Gettier cases do not know what they truly and justifiedly believe.)

If Lewis is right that we may not properly ignore possibilities that saliently resemble actuality, then it is difficult to see how there could be a context in which we are properly ignoring alternative realization scenarios. As before, suppose  $R_1$  is the actual realization of  $T$ , and  $R_2$  is just like  $R_1$  except that the first two members of  $R_1$  have been permuted in  $R_2$ . What could more saliently resemble actuality (the possibility that  $R_1$  realizes  $T$ ) than the possibility that  $R_2$  realizes  $T$ ? Salient resemblance is a matter of resemblance with respect to the features that *we* are paying attention to. But, given that our only grasp on the properties that realize  $T$  is through the use of blindly-rigidified definite descriptions, the possibility in which  $R_1$  realizes  $T$  and the possibility in which  $R_2$  realizes  $T$  are identical with respect to every feature we ever *could* pay attention to—again, they have no features that we are in a position to distinguish. Hence, their salient resemblance is guaranteed, and thus we cannot properly ignore one if we cannot properly ignore the other.

This concludes my discussion of the responses to ordinary skepticism that won't work as responses to quiddistic skepticism. I now turn to

## Section Five: Two Dogs That Might Hunt

In the preceding sections we saw that three of the most popular responses to traditional skepticism are unsuccessful when it comes to quiddistic skepticism. But there are two responses that do have some initial plausibility as responses to quiddistic skepticism. My intention here is not to defend these responses as successful responses to quiddistic skepticism. To do that, I would need to defend the principles upon which they, respectively, rest. My point here is simply to show that *if* one of these principles is right, then quiddistic skepticism is false (or, rather, we have no reason to think that it is true).

### *Anti-quidditism*

The first response to consider is that of denying the metaphysical assumption upon which the argument for quiddistic skepticism rests, namely, quidditism. If the properties that actually realize T are the only theories that could have realized T, then knowing the proposition that T is realized *just is* knowing the true proposition about which properties realize T.<sup>52</sup>

I hope that Chapter One has gone some way to convince you of the plausibility of quidditism. But is the fact that quiddistic skepticism follows from quidditism *itself* a reason to reject quidditism? Although some philosophers have seemed to think so, I for one cannot see why this should be. Unless we have *some independent reason* to think that we *will* know which properties realize the final theory, it seems that we cannot reject quidditism merely on the grounds that it implies quiddistic skepticism. As David Lewis puts it ‘Who ever promised me that I was capable in principle of knowing everything?’ (2008: 211)

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<sup>52</sup> This of course assumes that propositions are no more finely individuated than sets of possible worlds. If you think that propositions—or whatever the objects of knowledge are—are more finely individuated than that, then quiddistic skepticism could be true even if quidditism is false.

### *Direct Realism*

The other response to quiddistic skepticism that has at least some plausibility is a kind of direct realism about the properties that realize T. Lewis himself considers such a response:

A friend of phenomenal qualia might speculate that all the actually instantiated fundamental properties are qualia. That would not preclude them from also occupying physical roles—a sort of panpsychism. So, even if our true final theory is a physical theory, they might be the members of its actual realization. He might also accept the Identification Thesis: anyone acquainted with a quale knows just which property it is [it the *strong* sense of knowing-which]. Now it may seem that we can know the identities of the fundamental properties after all—we need only become acquainted with them. (2008: 217)

Interestingly, Lewis rejects this response to quiddistic skepticism not because it requires that the fundamental properties be qualia, but because he rejects the Identification Thesis.

I do not want to debate the Identification Thesis here. My point is simply to note that (A) the response Lewis is considering seems to be something of a direct realist response and (B) the direct realist response at least stands some chance of refuting quiddistic skepticism.

Why does the direct realist response stand a chance of refuting quiddistic skepticism, while other standard responses to traditional skepticism do not? The direct realist will deny Lewis's assumption that the O-language refers to the fundamental properties only by means of descriptions of their roles. Consider the fundamental property referred to by the T-term ' $t_1$ '. Now imagine the direct realist becoming directly acquainted with  $t_1$  (as a quale) and, according to the Identification Thesis, thereby knowing which property she is acquainted with. Now imagine her 'baptizing' this property with the O-term ' $o_1$ '. This is enough to block Lewis's argument that T has multiple possible realizations.

Recall that that argument assumed that (1) the O-language refers to fundamental properties only by means of role-descriptions and (2) the O-language suffices to describe all possible observations. If the direct realist is right about this case, then it seems that ‘ $o_1$ ’ does not refer to  $o_1$  by means of a role-description. Thus, if the term ‘ $o_1$ ’ is made part of the O-language, then (1) is not true. If, on the other hand, the term ‘ $o_1$ ’ is not made part of the O-language (because, say, terms of direct acquaintance such as ‘ $o_1$ ’ can only be part of a private language), then (2) is not true, because there is a possible observation that the O-language does not describe—namely, that of becoming directly acquainted with  $o_1$ .<sup>53</sup>

### **Section Six: Capitulation**

The final response to quiddistic skepticism that we should consider is capitulation. This is of course Lewis’s own response. He asks rhetorically, “[Why] should I want to block that argument? Why is [quiddistic skepticism] ‘ominous?’” (2008: 211). If there is one thing that all parties to the dispute over quiddistic skepticism are agreed to, it is that quiddistic skepticism is probably the most benign form of ignorance one could have. Not knowing which properties realize T is nothing, to say the least, like not knowing that one has hands, not knowing that one is having a conversations with other people, or not knowing that the sun will rise tomorrow.

What has been less than clear, I think, is exactly *why* quiddistic skepticism is less ominous than, say, traditional, external-world skepticism. I think that things here have been confused because there are two ways in which quiddistic skepticism is less ominous than traditional skepticism. The first, and fairly well-recognized way, is that quiddistic skepticism claims that we will never know something that we never believed we did know

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<sup>53</sup> As Lewis’s notes, this second possibility is rather dubious: there seems to be no reason why agents would have a private language that was more expressive than the language of T, which is, recall, the true and complete *final* theory of our world.

(consider again the deductionist response from above). The traditional skeptic, on the other hand, makes claims that we do not know things that we certainly do believe we know.

However, there is a second, and perhaps more important way in which quiddistic skepticism is less ominous than traditional skepticism: while traditional skepticism posits ignorance of facts that are relevant to decisions we must make (should we give to charity or live for hedonistic pleasure?) quiddistic skepticism posits ignorance of facts that are in principle irrelevant to *any* decision that we could ever face. Convincing you of this and more is the burden of the next chapter.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**THE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SKEPTICISM**

The ancient Greeks seem to have been very concerned with the practical significance of their philosophical views, and with the practical significance of *skepticism* in particular. Pyrrho and Carneades held that skepticism, if properly practiced, would lead to a life of contentment. But not all philosophers agreed, and debate raged on. Contemporary philosophers, by contrast, have dedicated the lion's share of their work on skepticism to whether this, that, or the other type skepticism is *true* and *why or why not*.

In this paper, I want to set-aside the question of whether this, that, or the other type of skepticism is true, and make a return to question: *so what?* Now my question here will not quite be the same as that with which the ancients seemed to have been most concerned. They seem to have been primarily concerned with the question: how will/should one's behavior change if one becomes a skeptic? My question is no doubt related to these, but it is different. My question is this: does the *truth* of some type of skepticism—regardless of whether one *becomes* a skeptic—have implications for how we ought to behave?

I will be arguing that in some cases the answer is 'yes', and the primary goal of this paper is to say in which cases. To this end, I will be making two crosscutting distinctions between types of skepticism, giving us four types of skepticism in all. I will argue that skepticisms of exactly one of these types have practical significance. Along the way, we will see that quiddistic skepticism—the skepticism argued for in the previous chapter—is a skepticism *without* practical significance. We will also see that at least one type of traditional, external-world skepticism is a skepticism *with* practical significance.



## Section One: Four Varieties of Skepticism

The first distinction between skepticism that I would like to draw is a familiar one. On the one hand, there are views according to which we cannot *know* some proposition P. On the other hand, there are views according to which we are cannot *justifiably believe* some proposition P. Philosophers typically refer to these, respectively, as ‘knowledge skepticisms’ and ‘justification skepticisms’. With respect to propositions about the external world, an example of knowledge skepticism is the thesis that we cannot *know* that there are rocks, tables, etc. An example of justification skepticism is the thesis that we cannot *justifiably believe* that there are rocks, tables, etc.. Finally, if you accept the common assumption that justification is necessary but not sufficient for knowledge, then you will think that, with respect to a given proposition P, justification skepticism about p is a *stronger* claim than knowledge skepticism about P.

I trust that the distinction between knowledge skepticism and justification skepticism is familiar enough. But let me say one thing about what sort of ‘justification’ we have in mind when we speak of ‘justification skepticism’. Philosophers typically draw a distinction between *epistemic justification* and *pragmatic justification*. When I speak of ‘justification skepticism’ I mean views that deny that we can be *epistemically justified* in believing a certain proposition.

Of course, there is no agreed-upon definition of ‘epistemic justification’ or ‘pragmatic justification’.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, we can characterize the distinction as between the kind of justification one has for a belief in virtue of one’s *evidence* (epistemic justification) and the kind of justification one has for a belief in virtue of *the consequences* of having that belief (pragmatic justification). That is all I will say about this matter for now. Below, I will have quite a bit more to say on the distinction between these two types of justification and on the relationship between them.

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<sup>54</sup> An agreed-upon definition of the former is, after all, one of the holy grails of epistemology.

The other distinction I would like to draw between skepticisms is much less familiar, and getting clear on this distinction will take the remainder of this section. Roughly, the distinction is between skepticism that do, and skepticisms that do not allow that we can *grasp* or *understand* the proposition with respect to which they deny knowledge/justified belief. I think there's no better way to elucidate this distinction than to look straightaway at representative examples on each side of it.

Here is how Peter Unger (1975) sums-up the classical argument for knowledge skepticism about the external world:

We begin by arbitrarily choosing something concerning an external world which might... be known... e.g., that there are rocks.... Now, first, *if* someone... *knows* that there are rocks, then that person *can know* the following quite exotic thing: there is *no* evil scientist deceiving him into falsely believing that there are rocks... But, no one *can ever know* that this exotic situation *does not* obtain... So, thirdly, as a consequence of these two premises, we have our skeptical conclusion: you never *know* that there are rocks. (pp. 7 – 8)

As Unger says, the general strategy here is to take some proposition *p* that we think we know and then present what Unger calls a 'contrast case'—that is, a proposition that entails that *p* is false, but which we cannot know not to obtain. In this case, the proposition that we think we know is the proposition that there are rocks, and the contrast case is the proposition that there is a mad-scientist who is deceiving us into thinking that there are rocks.

Note a particular aspect of this familiar type of argument: nowhere in the argument does the skeptic claim that there are any limits on what we can *conceive*, *grasp*, or *understand*. In particular, the skeptic does *not* claim that we cannot *conceive* of rocks as opposed to mad scientists, or that we do not *grasp* the difference between rocks and mad scientists. Rather, the skeptic allows that we understand *what it would be* for there to be

rocks rather than a deceiving mad scientist. To put things roughly, this type of skeptic presupposes that we know what rocks and deceiving mad scientists *are*—at least in the relevant sense of being able to conceptually distinguish between the two—but argues that we do not know which of these things *exists*: we know *what* rocks are without knowing *that* they are.

Now let's compare the above argument with the skeptical argument in Thomas Nagel's 'What is it Like to be a Bat?' (1974):

I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task... If anyone is inclined to deny that we can believe in the existence of a fact like this whose exact nature we cannot conceive, he should reflect that in contemplating the bats we are in much the same position that intelligent bats or Martians would occupy if they tried to form a conception of what it would be like to be us... Certainly it is possible for a human being to believe that there are facts which humans never will possess the requisite concepts to represent or comprehend. (pp. 439 – 440)

Nagel concludes that we cannot know what it is like to be bat. That is to say, Nagel concludes that there is some true proposition *p* about what it is like to be a bat such that we cannot know that *p*. Hence, just like Unger's, Nagel's conclusion is a type of knowledge skepticism.<sup>55</sup>

But notice the decidedly *different* argumentative strategies of Unger and Nagel. While Unger uses the so-called 'contrast-case' method, Nagel uses what we might call the

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<sup>55</sup> Admittedly, Nagel's *ultimate* purpose in (1974) is not to argue for a kind of skepticism, but to raise a particular problem for physicalism about mental states. Nonetheless, his *immediate* purpose here is to establish a kind of skepticism—namely, skepticism about the mental states of certain other creatures—and that skepticism plays a key role in his argument against physicalism.

‘inconceivability method’. For Unger, the skeptical conclusion that we cannot know that  $p$  is meant to follow from the fact that there are two conceivable, mutually inconsistent propositions  $p$  and  $q$  such that we do know that *not-q*. For Nagel, however, the skeptical conclusion that we cannot know that  $p$  is meant to follow from the fact that we cannot even *conceive* of  $p$ —that is, we do not have a *grasp* or *understanding* of what it would be for  $p$  to be true.

I want to label these two types of skepticism—the types exemplified, respectively, by Unger and Nagel—‘Cartesian skepticism’ and ‘Kantian skepticism’. (Why do I call the latter kinds of skepticism ‘Kantian’? I come to this below.) As I shall be using the terms, a Cartesian skeptic is someone who allows that we have a non-trivial grasp on at least two possible scenarios or propositions, but nonetheless holds that we cannot know that one of the scenarios obtains rather than the other. A Kantian skeptic, on the other hand, is someone who thinks that we cannot know that one scenario obtains rather than another *precisely because* we have no non-trivial grasp of what it is for the one scenario to obtain rather than the other.

Notice that the distinction between Cartesian and Kantian skepticism has nothing to do with a difference in domain. The fact that Unger’s argument is a form of Cartesian skepticism has nothing to do with the fact that it is about *external objects* (such as rocks) and the fact that Nagel’s skepticism is a form of Kantian skepticism has nothing to do with the fact that it is about *bat sensations*. In fact, we could have Kantian skepticism about external objects and we could have Cartesian skepticism about bat sensations. A Kantian skeptic about external objects might say something like this:

There is something that is, in fact, causing our sense perceptions as of rocks. But we have no *conception* of what this thing is, nor of what alternative things might

have been causing our perceptions as of rocks. Hence, we cannot know what sort of thing is causing our sense perceptions as of rocks.<sup>56</sup>

And a Cartesian skepticism about what it's like to be a bat might look something like this:

You think you know what it is like to be a bat—say, you think you know that it is pleasurable to be a bat. But if you know that, then you can know that it is not painful to be a bat. But you cannot know that it is not painful to be a bat, and hence you do not know that it is pleasurable to be a bat.<sup>57</sup>

Cartesian skepticism, as I am using the term here, is probably what most philosophers have in mind when they use the term 'skepticism'. But Kantian skepticism has just as much right to that title, and instances of Kantian skepticism can be found throughout the philosophical literature. In his classic (1905) and elsewhere, Bertrand Russell famously held that much of our knowledge is limited to what he calls 'knowledge by description'—i.e., knowledge of *general propositions*, such as the proposition that there exist a unique so and so, as opposed to *singular propositions*, such as the proposition that *a* is a so and so, where '*a*' names an individual. In particular, Russell argued that we cannot know any singular proposition that is singular with respect to an individual mind other than one's own. In thus arguing for a certain limit on our knowledge, Russell is arguing for a kind of skepticism. Moreover, if we consider just how his argument for this skeptical conclusion goes, we can see that his skepticism is Kantian, not Cartesian. He writes:

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<sup>56</sup> Putnam (1981) can reasonably be interpreted as arguing that traditional *Cartesian* skepticism about the external world ought to be replaced with this kind of *Kantian* skepticism about the external world.

<sup>57</sup> This sort of skepticism is just an instance of what usually goes by the name 'skepticism about other minds'.

[When] there is anything which we do not have immediate acquaintance, but only definition by denoting phrases [e.g., ‘the F’], then the propositions in which this thing is introduced by means of a denoting phrase do not really contain this thing as a constituent, but contain instead the constituents expressed by the several words of the denoting phrase [e.g., the universal *Fness*]. Thus in every proposition that we can apprehend... all the constituents are really entities with which we have immediate acquaintance. Now such things as matter (in the sense in which matter occurs in physics) and the minds of other people are known to us only by denoting phrases, i.e., we are not *acquainted* with them, but we know them as what has such and such properties. Hence, although we can form propositional functions  $C(x)$  which must hold of such and such a material particle or of So-and-so’s mind, yet we are not acquainted with the propositions which affirm these things that we know must be true, because we cannot apprehend the actual entities concerned. What we know is “So-and-so has a mind which has such and such properties” but we do not know “A has such and such properties,” where A *is* the mind in question. In such a case, we know the properties of a thing without having acquaintance with the thing itself, and without, consequently, knowing any single proposition of which the thing itself is a constituent. (2005: 492 – 493)

For Russell, we cannot know that P, if P is a proposition that is singular with respect to other minds. But the reason we cannot know that P, according to Russell, is precisely that we cannot even *grasp* or *understand* P. Hence, Russell is offering a kind of Kantian skepticism.

In Chapter Two I developed and defended an argument offered by David Lewis (2008) in favor of a kind of skepticism we called ‘quiddistic skepticism’? Is that skepticism Cartesian or Kantian? I think it is quite clearly Kantian. As I understand it, Lewis’s argument for quiddistic skepticism goes something like this. We start by assuming quidditism, which says that a fundamental property’s nomological role is only *contingently*

realized by that property. From this it follows that merely knowing that such and such role is realized is not knowing *which* property realizes that role. But can we gain additional evidence as to which property realizes the role? I argued that we cannot gain such evidence and the reason that we cannot gain such evidence is that we cannot even *grasp* the true proposition about which property realizes the role.

To make this clear, consider my discussion of abductionism. Let  $H_1$  be the true proposition about which properties realize the nomological roles at our world and let  $H_2$  be some false proposition about which properties realize the roles. I claimed that we cannot know that  $H_1$  is the true hypothesis precisely because we have no way of non-trivially *representing*  $H_1$ . We can, of course, represent  $H_1$  as the proposition that *the properties that actually realize the roles are the properties that realize the roles*. But that does not give us a rich enough grasp on  $H_1$  to be able to infer  $H_1$ , rather than  $H_2$ , as the best explanation of our evidence. (Notice that we can represent the true proposition about what its like to be a bat in the same sort of way.)

Because the inability to grasp the relevant proposition plays a key role in the argument for quiddistic skepticism, the skepticism of Chapter Two is thoroughly Kantian. . . Indeed, the whole point of my argument in Chapter Two was to show that standard responses to traditional (i.e., Cartesian) skepticism about the external world do not apply to quiddistic skepticism *precisely because* the latter, at least as Lewis argues for it, is a kind of Kantian skepticism. That is not to say that one couldn't be a *Cartesian* quiddistic skeptic. To do so, one need only grant that we can grasp the true proposition about which properties realize the roles and then find some *other* reason for denying that we can come to know this proposition. But that is quite obviously not the kind of skepticism argued for in Chapter Two, and it is not what *I* have in mind when I speak of 'quiddistic skepticism'.

Finally, we come to the eponymous example of Kantian skepticism. In Lewis's (2008) paper, he says that his argument for quiddistic skepticism was inspired by an argument that Rae Langton (2001) attributes to Kant. That argument, as I understand it, goes something like this: although for a given object  $O$ , there is a true proposition  $p$

concerning which intrinsic properties  $O$  has, we do not *know* those properties, and hence we do not *know* what it would be for  $p$  to be true. And from this it is supposed to follow that we cannot know that  $p$ . Now I am not qualified to have an opinion on these matters, but it does seem to me that Descartes' *First Meditation* is an exercise in what I'm calling Cartesian skepticism and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* defends a kind of Kantian skepticism (whether it is precisely the skepticism that Langton attributes to Kant is another matter). In any case, I politely request that you allow me to use these labels as I choose, and to not read too much into them.

Thus far I have made the distinction between Kantian skepticism and Cartesian skepticism exclusively in terms of *knowledge* skepticism. But it should be plain to see that the same distinction can be made between types of *justification* skepticism. The distinction between Cartesian and Kantian skepticism is a distinction in the *reasons* that the skeptic has for holding his skeptical conclusion. In the case of knowledge skepticism, the Kantian skeptic holds that one cannot know that  $p$  precisely because one cannot grasp that  $p$ . In other words, he accepts an argument of something like this form:

1. We cannot grasp the proposition  $p$ .
2. Therefore, we cannot know that  $p$ .

Equally, a *justification*-Kantian skeptic is one who accepts an argument of this form:

1. We cannot grasp the proposition  $p$ .
2. Therefore, we cannot justifiably believe that  $p$ .

The Cartesian skeptic, on the other hand, grants that we can *grasp*  $p$ , yet nonetheless holds, for some other reason, that we cannot know/justifiably believe that  $p$ . Perhaps, like Unger, he thinks that we cannot know/justifiably believe that  $p$  because we cannot know/justifiably believe that *not- $q$* , where  $q$  is a proposition that is inconsistent with  $p$ . Or perhaps he makes



his knowledge/justified-belief denial for some other reason. In any case, he does *not* make it for the reason that one cannot grasp *p*.

The Kantian/Cartesian distinction thus crosscuts the knowledge/justification distinction. Given this four-way distinction between types of skepticism, let's get down to the business of this chapter: which of these types of skepticism have implications for how we ought to behave? In the remainder of this chapter I'll be arguing for the following answer:

Type of Skepticism	Practical Significance?
Knowledge-Cartesian	No
Knowledge-Kantian	No
Justification-Cartesian	Some
Justification-Kantian	No

## Section Two: The Reasonable-belief Principle

Suppose you face a decision—say, whether to go to the store or to stay home. You may ask yourself: what ought I to do? Or rather: which action is the thing to do? You may answer the question by coming up with particular reasons, say, to go the store. But can we fit these particular reasons into some more general pattern? That is, is there a general answer to the question: given some action A, what conditions must be met for A to be the thing to do?

Standard decision theory has an answer to this question: an action A is rational for a person S if and only if A has highest *expected utility* given S's beliefs and values.

Different versions of decision theory disagree on how exactly to define 'expected utility', but in this paper I'll be assuming that some version of *causal* decision theory (CDT) gives

the correct definition. Just to fix ideas, according to Gibbard and Harper's version of CDT, expect utility is to be defined as follows:

$$U(A) = \sum_O P(A \square \rightarrow O)V(O)$$

where  $A \square \rightarrow O$  is the subjunctive conditional *if the agent were to do A, then this would cause it to be the case that O*,  $P(A \square \rightarrow O)$  is the agent's degree of belief that  $A \square \rightarrow O$ , and  $V(O)$  is the degree to which the agent values the outcome O.<sup>58</sup>

But is this a complete story about which action is the thing to do? In particular, is the fact that an action A has maximum expected utility given an agent's *actual* beliefs and values sufficient for A's being the thing to do, no matter *what* the agent's beliefs and values are like? Or must the agent's beliefs and values satisfy some further condition? Let's consider a case.

Howard is an ordinary guy, with ordinary evidence about the reliability of fortune cookies—that is, he has overwhelming evidence that they are completely *unreliable*. Nevertheless, Howard receives a fortune cookie that tells him that 'good health will be his for a long time' and, due to wishful thinking, he comes to hold the unreasonable belief that he will not become ill over the next year. Accordingly, he decides to cancel his appointment to buy health insurance later that day. Question: *Was cancel his appointment* the thing for Howard to do in his situation?

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<sup>58</sup> Note that when used alone, 'A' stands for an action, but when use in ' $A \square \rightarrow O$ ', 'A' stands for the proposition that the agent in question performs A. This is a simplification that I hope won't cause any confusion.

There are two popular reactions to cases of this sort. The first type of reaction says something like, ‘yes, *cancel his appointment* was the thing for Howard to do, because, after all, he believed that he would have good health, and that belief, together with his values (we are assuming his values are the ordinary ones), determine that that action has highest expected utility’. The second type of response says, ‘no, *cancel his appointment* was not the thing for Howard to do in this situation because Howard did not have a *reasonable belief* that he would have good health for a long time; rather, Howard *ought* to have believed that there was a significance chance that he would not have good health for a long time, and, given that belief, *cancel his appointment* would not have had highest expected utility’. These reactions can be seen as embodying, respectively, two competing principles.

**The Mere-Belief Principle:**<sup>59</sup> A is the thing for S to do if and only if A has highest expected utility given S’s actual beliefs and values.

**The Reasonable-Belief Principle:** A is the thing for S to do if and only if A has highest expected utility given S’s values and the beliefs that it is *reasonable* for S to have.<sup>60</sup>

According to the first principle, it simply doesn’t matter whether one’s beliefs are reasonable: if you have those beliefs, and those beliefs are such that action A has highest expected utility (given your values, or the values that it is reasonable to have),<sup>61</sup> then A is the thing to do. According to the second principle, however, the thing to do is determined,

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<sup>59</sup> Generally, I call principles such as these ‘doxo-pragmatic principles’, as they server to connect questions about belief to questions about action.

<sup>60</sup> There is also, of course, room to argue over whether the action must have highest expected utility given S’s *actual* values or the values that she would be *reasonable* for S to have. But this question is tangential to our discussion here, and so I set it aside.

<sup>61</sup> See previous note.

not by maximizing expected utility relative to one's *actual* beliefs, but rather relative to the beliefs that one is *reasonable* to have.

What does all this have to do with the practical significance of skepticisms? Suppose for the moment that the reasonable-belief principle is correct. If, as some philosophers have argued, one's beliefs are reasonable *only if* they are justified, it seems to follow that justification skepticisms will potentially have significance for what one ought to do. Similarly, if knowledge (of something) is necessary for reasonable belief, then knowledge skepticisms potentially have practical significance as well. We'll return to the antecedents of these conditionals, and to the meaning of the 'potentially' qualifier below. For now, let's just tentatively say this: if the reasonable-belief principle is correct, then both justification and knowledge skepticisms *threaten* to have practical significance.

But is the reasonable-belief principle correct? Here is something I think everyone can agree on: given the situation Howard was in just before he came to believe that he will be healthy for a long time—that is, just after he read the fortune cookie—the thing for Howard to do was, first, *not* come to believe that he will be healthy for a long time and, second, *not* cancel his appointment to buy health insurance. One might think that this makes the case for the reasonable-belief principle. But not so fast: defenders of the mere-belief principle will say, sure, *before* Howard came to believe that he would have good health, the thing for him to do was to not cancel his appointment to buy health insurance; however, *after* he came to believe that he would have good health, *cancel his appointment* became the thing to do, even though his belief was unreasonable.

Moreover, defenders of the mere-belief principle might argue as follows. Let us ask: what was Howard's *mistake*? Every reasonable epistemologist will agree that he made a mistake in holding the belief that he will have good health. But did he make any mistake *over and above* that mistake? We may be tempted to say that it was a mistake for him to cancel his appointment to buy health insurance. But when we say that he made a mistake in acting the way he did, are we saying anything *more* than that he made a mistake in holding the belief upon which he based his action? Suppose, for example, that instead of

canceling his appointment to buy health insurance, Howard went ahead and bought health insurance, all the while retaining his (unreasonable) belief that he would have good health. Wouldn't he *then* be making a further mistake, a mistake over and above the mistake of holding the unreasonable belief? In that case, not only would his belief have been unreasonable, but his action would have been, so to speak, one that didn't even make sense by his own lights. To perform such an action is surely to make some sort of mistake. Thus, proponents of the mere-belief principle will conclude, the thing for Howard to do, after forming the belief that he will have good health, was to cancel his appointment.

This line of argument is powerful indeed. But I do not think it establishes what it purports to establish. We need to be careful to separate two questions: first, 'Has Howard made any mistake over and above holding the belief upon which he based his action?', and, second, 'Was Howard's action the thing to do?'. I think it is consistent to say that although Howard's only mistake was to hold that belief, his action was *not* the thing to do. In other words, Howard performed an action that was not the thing to do, but he did not thereby make a mistake (over and above holding the belief upon which the action was based).

What makes an action *the thing to do*? An action is the thing to do if and only if that action is the action one has *most reason* to do. It seems clear to me that, in the situation envisioned above, the thing that Howard had most reason to do was to buy health insurance. Howard's evidence—being the evidence of an ordinary person in his situation—made it unreasonable for Howard to believe that he would have good health, and this gave Howard reason to buy health insurance. Thus, not having any overriding reason to *not* buy health insurance, the thing that Howard had most reason to do was to buy health insurance. Of course, Howard will *say* that canceling his appointment was the thing to do, and by his lights, that was the thing to do. And although we should not *agree* with Howard on this, we should acknowledge that, other than simply being *wrong* about which action was the thing to do, and other than holding an unreasonable belief that he will have good health, Howard makes no mistakes.

What about the claim that Howard would be making a further mistake if he bought health insurance while maintaining his belief that he will have good health? Doesn't that show that the thing to do was to cancel his appointment? No, it only shows that the thing to do was *not* to cancel his appointment *while* maintaining his belief that he will have good health. But no one is claiming that. Proponents of the reasonable-belief principle do not say that the thing for Howard to do was to buy health insurance while keeping his belief that he will have good health; they merely say that the thing for Howard to do was to buy health insurance. If this requires, as I think it does, that Howard abandon his belief that he will have good health in order to avoid making a further mistake, then proponents of the reasonable-belief principle will conclude that the thing for Howard to do was to cancel his appointment *and* abandon his belief that he will have good health. Given Howard's evidential situation, that does seem like the thing for Howard to do.

I tentatively conclude in favor of the reasonable-belief principle. I admit that I haven't said anything here that is going to unconvinced the convinced proponent of the mere-belief principle. Still, my only hope is that I have made a strong enough case in favor of the reasonable-belief principle to take it on as a (tentative) assumption in what follows.

Taking on the reasonable-belief principle gets us part way to the practical significance of skepticisms. But it doesn't get us all the way. For that, we need to know whether knowledge, on the one hand, or justification, on the other, is necessary for reasonable belief.

### **Section Three: Is Knowledge Necessary for Reasonable Belief?**

Few philosophers would claim that in order to be reasonable in believing that *p*, one must know that *p*. After all, 'knows' is factive, whereas 'reasonably believes' is not.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> I here set-aside the sense of 'knows' according to which it is often felicitous to say things like: 'I can't believe that he finished in last place—I just *knew* he would win!'.

Nevertheless, some philosophers have argued that knowledge of *something* is necessary for reasonable belief that *p*. Peter Unger (1975) is just such a philosopher.

Unger (1975) draws a distinction between knowledge skepticism, justification skepticism, and what we might call ‘reasonableness skepticism’—the claim that one cannot be reasonable in believing that *p*, for some specified proposition *p*.<sup>63</sup> Unger points out that many philosophers have held that knowledge of a certain domain is impossible while maintaining that reasonable belief about that domain is not. For example, many philosophers hold that although we cannot *know* that we are not brains in vats, we can nonetheless *reasonably believe* that we are not brains in vats. Unger calls this the ‘retreat to reasonable belief’, and he is intent on showing that such a position is untenable.<sup>64</sup>

More precisely, Unger wants to show that *universal* knowledge skepticism—knowledge skepticism with respect to *all* propositions—implies *universal* reasonableness skepticism—reasonableness skepticism with respect to all propositions.<sup>65</sup> He calls this the thesis that ‘ignorance implies irrationality’ and his argument runs as follows:

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<sup>63</sup> Note that reasonableness skepticism and justification skepticism are not the same. I discuss the relationship between them below.

<sup>64</sup> Unger is also intent on showing that knowledge skepticism implies justification skepticism. Does that argument concern us here? It does, but indirectly. Below I argue that justification skepticism (at least some kinds of justification skepticisms) have practical significance. Thus, if it’s true that knowledge skepticism implies justification skepticism, then at least some kinds of knowledge skepticism will have practical significance. However, Unger’s argument for the claim that knowledge skepticism implies justification skepticism is precisely parallel to the argument we will consider in this section and fails for a precisely parallel reason. See footnote 66 for more details.

<sup>65</sup> Unger also has arguments to the effect that more limited types of knowledge skepticism imply more limited types of justification skepticism. However, those arguments depend on the argument for the thesis concerning universal skepticisms. Thus, undermining the latter argument, which I plan to do here, will serve to undermine the former arguments.

(1) If S is (even in the least bit) reasonable in believing that *p*, then there is something which is S's reason for believing that *p* or there are some things which are S's reasons for believing that *p*.

(2) If there is something which is S's reason for believing that *p*, then there is some propositional value of '*q*' such that S's reason *is that q* and if there are some things which are S's reasons for believing that *p*, then there are some propositional values of '*q*' and '*r*' and so on such that S's reasons *are that q and that r* and so on.

(3) If S's reason for believing that *p is that q*, then S *knows* that *q*; and if S's reasons for believing that *p are that q and that r* and so on, then S *knows* that *q* and that *r* and so on.<sup>66</sup>

Is Unger's argument sound? The inference from (1), (2), and (3) to the thesis that ignorance implies irrationality is, it seems to me, valid. So to block the argument we must undermine one of its premises.

The weakness, or at least one of the weaknesses, lies with (3). Gettier cases will show us the light. Suppose Jack is, unbeknownst to him, driving through fake-rain country, a place where the residents are intent on making it *look like* it has been raining each afternoon, even when it has not been.<sup>67</sup> For example, every afternoon that it doesn't rain,

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<sup>66</sup> I have modified Unger's argument by restricting it to the case of *belief*. The premises and conclusion of Unger's actual argument read 'If S is (even in the least bit) reasonable *in something X*, then...' etc. Unger's premises and conclusion thus actually cover not only when S is reasonable in *believing* something, but also when S is reasonable in *doing some action*. Obviously, if the restricted version of Unger's argument is unsound, as I argue below, then so is his general version.

<sup>67</sup> An example involving the well-known fake-barn country would equally serve our purposes. I use fake-rain country merely for the sake of drawing a clear disanalogy with the case considered by Unger in *favor* of his third premise.



the residents of fake-rain country send out spray-and-sprinkle trucks to wet the grass. But now suppose that on the day Jack is driving through fake-rain country, it has in fact rained, and Jack, although he arrives too late to see the rain, nonetheless sees the effects of the rain (the wet grass, etc.). Now Jack receives a call from a friend on his mobile phone. ‘How do the crops look around there? Do you think they’ll grow?’ his friend asks. ‘Yes,’ says Jack, ‘The crops will grow. It has been raining just this afternoon.’

What was Jack’s reason for believing that the crops will grow? The answer, it seems, is that it was raining. Nevertheless, since Jack is in fake-rain country, Jack does not *know* that it has been raining. This shows, contra (3), that *that q* (that it was raining) can be one of Jack’s reasons for believing that *p* (that the crops will grow), even when Jack does not know that *q*. If this is right, then Unger’s is wrong.

Interestingly, Unger considers a similar Gettier case and comes to the exact *opposite* conclusion. Indeed, he takes the Gettier case he considers to provide a key piece of evidence in *favor* of (3). He writes:

[Suppose that] Mary was indoors but then she came outside and looked around. The ground and objects outside were all wet just as if wetted recently by falling rain. And, other indications all pointed to its having rained. Indeed, this is why Mary is certain that it was raining. But, unbeknownst to Mary, while it did in fact rain, the rain was rapidly evaporated due to some extraordinary events: For one, the temperature outside went up to 130°F. for an hour. Right after the evaporation, some huge spray-and-sprinkle trucks swept by and covered the area with water again, and they did it in just the way that rain does. So, it all looked just as if nothing had evaporated. Because she sees the water, Mary is certain that it was raining. And, because she is certain of this, Mary thinks that the crops will grow now. Now, it is of course true that it was raining. But is it true that Mary’s *reason* for thinking this about the crops is *that it was raining*? She says that it is. But it seems to me quite clear that that can’t be her reason... And, the reason for this

seems also quite clear: It must be false [to say that that is her reason] because Mary doesn't *know* it was raining.

Now we seem to be in a pickle. We considered a Gettier case (Jack in fake-rain country) in which, intuitively, the unknown proposition *could* be the agent's reason. But Unger has a case (Mary in freakishly-high-temperatures country) in which, intuitively, the unknown proposition *could not* be the agent's reason. Do we have then an irreconcilable clash of intuitions? Is there nothing left to do but hand the cases over to the 'experimental philosophers'? Fortunately, we need not break out the survey forms just yet. The question is how can we reconcile the fact that Mary's reason could not be that it was raining while Jack's reason could. To do so, we'll need to find a crucial difference between the two cases. I think we can find such a difference, and we can find it without having to leave our armchairs.

The obvious difference between the case of Jack and the case of Mary concerns whether the true belief that it was raining was (in part) *caused* by the *fact* that it was raining. Jack's belief that it was raining was *caused* by the fact that it was raining, while Mary's believe that it was raining was not *caused* by the fact that it was raining—rather, it was caused by the fact that the spray-and-sprinkle trucks wetted the ground. This, or something quite near it, explains why *that it was raining* could be one of Jack's reasons for believing that the crops will grow, while *that it was raining* could not be one of Mary's reasons for believing that the crops will grow.

This suggests that we can handle Unger's Gettier case with a principle that is distinct from Unger's (3)—namely:

(3\*) If S's reason for believing that *p* is *that q*, then S's belief that *p* was (in part) caused by the fact that *q*; and so on.

Rejecting (3) in favor of (3\*) is enough to undermine Unger's argument. But I suspect that even (3\*) doesn't get things quite right. Perhaps a more accurate principle is something like:

(3\*\*) If S's reason for believing that  $p$  is *that*  $q$ , then S's belief that  $p$  counterfactually depends in a certain way on the fact that  $q$ ; and so on.

Maybe this still isn't quite right. In any case, it certainly isn't very precise. But for our purposes we need not worry about getting the principle exactly right.. My goal here is purely negative; it is to refute Unger's argument that ignorance implies irrationality. And I think the case of Jack and fake-rain country, by showing that Unger's premise (3) is false, does just that.<sup>68,69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Above I said that Unger gives a parallel argument for the thesis that knowledge skepticism implies justification skepticism. That argument contains an analogy of premise (3) in the current argument:

(3<sup>^</sup>) If S's justification for believing that  $p$  is *that*  $q$ , then S knows that  $q$ ; and so on.

This premise (3<sup>^</sup>) is wrong for a reason analogous to the reason that (3) is wrong: Jack does not know that it has rained, but his justification for believing that the crops will grow is, contra (3<sup>^</sup>), that it has rained.

<sup>69</sup> John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley (2008) defend a principle that is similar—but not equivalent—to Unger's premise (3). Does the argument presented here apply to Hawthorne and Stanley's principle? Indeed it does. Here is their principle:

**The Action-Knowledge Principle.** It is appropriate to treat the proposition  $p$  as a reason for acting only if one knows that  $p$ .

Consider again Jack in fake-rain country. Jack does not know that it has rained. But just as it is *possible*, contra Unger's premise (3), for *that it rained* to be Jack's reason for believing that the crops will grow, it is also *appropriate*, contra the Hawthorne and Stanley's Action-Knowledge Principle, for Jack to treat the proposition *that it has rained* as a reason for telling his friend that the crops will grow.

Refuting one argument in favor of the thesis that knowledge (of something) is necessary for reasonable belief certainly does not refute the thesis itself.<sup>70</sup> Is there something we can say against the thesis itself?

Consider a small child, Bridget, upon whom we unethically perform some experiments. Suppose that we have placed a hallucinogenic drug into Bridget's sippy cup, and Bridget is now hallucinating a red apple. For this reason, she believes that there is a red apple on the table in front of her. Skeptical worries aside, here it would seem that Bridget is perfectly *reasonable* in believing that there is a red apple in front of her. Nevertheless, Bridget certainly does not *know* that there is a red apple in front of her, nor does she *know* anything else that is relevant to her being reasonable in believing that there is a red apple in front of her. For example, she doesn't know that she is 'having sensations as if there is a red apple in front of her'. That is something she, lacking the concept of a *sensation as of a red apple* cannot even think, let alone know. Thus, it seems that there is nothing that Bridget must *know* in order to reasonably believe that there is a red apple on the table in front of her. There is no doubt that this isn't a knock-down argument against the thesis that knowledge (of something) is necessary for reasonable belief. But, in lieu of a convincing argument in *favor* of that thesis, I do think it gives us pretty good reason to reject it.

Given the reasonable-belief principle, the upshot of rejecting the thesis that knowledge is required for reasonable belief is that *knowledge skepticisms*—theses to the

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<sup>70</sup> What about Timothy Williamson's (2002) thesis that  $E = K$ ? This is the thesis that one's evidence is just what one knows. Assume that  $E = K$  is correct. Does Unger's thesis that universal knowledge skepticism implies universal unreasonableness follow? Not quite: for that, we need to add the assumption that one is reasonable in believing that  $p$  only if one has evidence for  $p$ . But those two claims—the claim that  $E = K$  and the claim that one is reasonable in believing that  $p$  only if one has evidence for  $p$ —do not go happily together. This is shown by the case considered in the next paragraph. There it is clear that Bridget is reasonable in believing that there is a red apple in front of her. But if she *does* have evidence for this belief, that evidence is not something she *knows* to obtain.

effect that we do not *know* that *p*, for some specified proposition *p*—have no practical significance. More precisely: knowledge skepticisms have no implications for how we ought to behave. That takes care of the first two lines on our table.

Type of Skepticism	Practical Significance?
Knowledge-Cartesian	No
Knowledge-Kantian	No
Justification-Cartesian	?
Justification-Kantian	?

### Section Five: Is Justification Necessary for Reasonable Belief?

In section one I drew the distinction between epistemic justification for belief and pragmatic justification for belief. I also stipulated that when I speak of ‘justification skepticisms’, I mean *epistemic justification*. So the question we need to ask in this section is whether epistemic justification is necessary for reasonable belief. If so, justification skepticisms have the potential for serious practical implications.

In the last section I distinguished between the claim that knowledge *of p* is necessary for reasonable belief that *p* and the claim that knowledge *of something* is necessary for reasonable belief that *p*. Call those claims, respectively, the ‘strong claim that knowledge is necessary for reasonable belief’ and ‘the weak claim that knowledge is necessary for reasonable belief’. We can make a similar distinction between claims about epistemic justification: on the one hand, we have the claim that epistemic justification for a belief *that p* is necessary for reasonable belief that *p*, and on the other hand we have the claim that epistemic justification for a belief *about something* is necessary for reasonable

belief that *p*. Call these, respectively, ‘the strong claim that epistemic justification is necessary for reasonable belief’ and the ‘the weak claim that epistemic justification is necessary for reasonable belief’.<sup>71</sup>

In the last section I assumed that the strong claim about knowledge was false and argued at length that the weak claim was as well. In this section, however, I will argue that although the strong claim about epistemic justification is false, the weak claim about epistemic justification is true. That is, I will argue that epistemically justified belief *about something* is necessary for reasonable belief. In the next section I’ll use this conclusion to argue that certain types of justification skepticisms have (drastic) practical significance.

The classic argument against the strong claim about epistemic justification is that having *pragmatic* justification for believing that *p* is often sufficient to make one *reasonable* in believing that *p*. My favorite examples of such cases involve self-fulfilling prophecy. Here’s one:

Jack is the quarterback for the Mountaineers, a college football team that is scheduled to play the Wolverines this Saturday. Unfortunately for Jack and the Mountaineers, all of the evidence available to Jack supports the propositions that his team will lose, and lose by a lot. (Suppose, for example, that the Mountaineers play in a “lower” subdivision of college football than do the Wolverines—who are highly ranked within their subdivision—and that the Mountaineer players are generally recognized to be of much lower quality than the Wolverine players.) But still, Jack believes that his team will win, and he refuses to consider any evidence to the contrary. He refuses to even *look* at the evidence, he says, because it might lead

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<sup>71</sup> Note that whereas almost no philosophers have accepted the strong claim about knowledge, many philosophers have accepted the strong claim about epistemic justification. The classic example of the latter, of course, is William Clifford (1877).

him to believe that his team will lose, which will in turn make it more likely that his team *will* lose.

In such a situation, Jack lacks epistemic justification for his belief that his team will win: the available evidence supports the proposition that his team will lose, not win.<sup>72</sup> However, it seems that Jack's *pragmatic* justification for holding his belief outweighs his lack of epistemic justification and so he is, all things considered, *reasonable* to hold his belief.

Cases such as these seem to show that the strong claim that epistemic justification is necessary for reasonable belief—the claim that epistemically justified belief *that p* is necessary for having a reasonable belief that *p*—is false. Of course, defenders of the strong claim have responses to arguments such as this. Fortunately, we not get involved in these disputes here. My primary purpose in this section is not to show that the strong claim is false; it is, rather, to show that weak claim is *true*. Hence, if you accept the strong claim, which entails the weak claim, all the better for me! Such readers may feel free to skip ahead to the next section.

Short of accepting the strong claim, why accept the weak claim? Consider again the reason to reject the strong claim: the strong claim ought to be rejected because mere *pragmatic justification* for a belief is often sufficient to make that belief reasonable. This suggests (but does not entail) that *either* pragmatic justification or epistemic justification is necessary for reasonable belief. Suppose that's so. Now suppose, as I will argue below, that epistemic justification for a belief *about something* is required for pragmatic

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<sup>72</sup> Jim Joyce reminds me that in typical cases of self-fulfilling prophecy, such as the one considered here, the agent often has *some* evidence for the belief merely in virtue of having that belief—that is to say, the agent's merely having the belief, it must be admitted, is at least *some* (however very little) evidence that the belief is true. Nevertheless, note that in the case at hand, and indeed in most cases of this sort, the agent does not thereby have *enough* evidence to pragmatically justify him in his belief. Thus, the example still serves our purpose.

justification for a belief that  $p$ . If that's so, then epistemic justification about something is necessary for a reasonable belief that  $p$ .

Now to make good on the promissory note: why think that epistemic justification for a belief about something is necessary for pragmatic justification? Well, what does it take to have a pragmatically justified belief? As a first pass, we might try saying something like this:  $S$  has a pragmatically justified belief that  $p$  if and only if  $S$ 's having the belief that  $p$  leads to better consequences than  $S$ 's not having the belief that  $p$ . But we can quickly see that this isn't right.

Bridget holds an ordinary lottery ticket in an ordinary state lottery. However, because Bridget is a wishful thinker, she believes that her ticket will win. Because she believes this, Bridget takes out a large loan to buy a piece of land that (A) would no longer have been available for purchase by the time the lottery winner is announced and (B) is going to make Bridget quite a lot of money, but (C) won't make Bridget any money until well after she will have to pay back the loan. As it happens, Bridget wins the lottery and all is wonderful.

Was Bridget pragmatically justified in believing that her ticket will win? It doesn't seem so, and this is despite the fact that, as it happens, her having that belief led to better consequences than her not having that belief would have led to.

The primary difference between the case of Bridget and the lottery and the case of Jack and the football game seems to be this: Jack, but not Bridget, has *epistemic justification* for believing that holding his belief will lead to better consequences than not holding it. It is in virtue of this, I suggest, that Jack is pragmatically justified in holding his belief. If that's right, then epistemic justification for a belief *about something* is necessary for pragmatic justification for a belief *that  $p$* . Hence, the weak claim is true: epistemic justification for a belief about something is necessary for reasonable belief that  $p$ .



Fortunately for the purposes of the next section, our argument actually establishes something a bit more precise than the weak claim. It establishes this: if S has a reasonable belief that  $p$ , then either (1) S is epistemically justified in believing that  $p$ , **or** (2) S is epistemically justified in believing that his believing that  $p$  will lead to better consequences than his not believing that  $p$ . As we're about to see, this implies that certain justification skepticisms have (drastic) practical significance.

## **V. The Practical Significance of Some Justification Skepticisms**

Suppose you're watching a giant boulder roll down a hill in your direction and you have two options: stay put or move out of the way. Which is the thing to do? Given the reasonable-belief principle, which action is the thing to do depends on what it is reasonable for you to believe. In this situation, which action is the thing to do will depend on whether it is reasonable for you to believe that a giant boulder is heading in your direction: if it is reasonable for you to believe that, then the thing to do is to get out of the way; if it is not reasonable for you to believe that, then perhaps 'stay put' is equally the thing to do—that is, 'move out of the way' is not uniquely the thing to do.

So our question is this: is it reasonable for you to believe that there is a giant boulder rolling down the hill in your direction? Most of us will want to say 'yes'. But if justification skepticism about the external world is true, then you don't have any epistemic justification for your belief that there is a giant boulder rolling down the hill in your direction. Still, that doesn't mean that you aren't reasonable in believing that a giant boulder is rolling down the hill in your direction. After all, you might have *pragmatic* reason to believe this, and if so, your belief might still be reasonable.

Assuming justification skepticism about the external world, our question becomes this: do you have *pragmatic* justification for believing that there is a giant boulder rolling down the hill in your direction. It might seem that the answer is 'yes', for the following reason: since we are assuming that there really is a boulder rolling down the hill in your

direction, *believing* that there is a boulder rolling down the hill in your direction is going to have better consequences than *not believing* that there is a giant boulder rolling down the hill in your direction.

But recall the conclusion of the last section: to have pragmatic justification for your belief it is not sufficient that it merely *be the case that* holding the belief has better consequences than not holding it (recall the case of Bridget and the lottery). Rather, one must have *epistemic justification for believing* that holding the belief has better consequences than not holding it. But do you have epistemic justification for believing that holding the belief that there is a boulder rolling down the hill in your direction will have better consequences than not holding that belief? Not, it seems, if justification skepticism about the external world is correct: since you have no epistemic justification for believing that there is a boulder rolling down the hill in your direction, you have no epistemic justification for believing that your holding the belief that there is such a boulder will result in your moving and thus result not getting crushed, while your not holding that belief will result in your not moving and thus getting crushed.

But wait. There's a hole in the argument. For it might be possible, as far as justification skepticism about the *external* world is concerned, to have epistemically justified beliefs about the 'internal world' consequences of believing/not believing that there is a giant boulder rolling in your direction.<sup>73</sup> For example, as far as justification skepticism about the external world is concerned, you may have epistemic justification for believing that your not believing that there is a giant boulder heading in your direction will result in your *having sensations as if you are being crushed*, while your believing that there is a giant boulder heading in your direction will result in your *not having sensations as if you are being crushed*. And *having sensations as if you are being crushed* is much worse than *not having sensations as if you are being crushed*. Thus, justification skepticism about the external world is compatible with your being pragmatically justified in believing

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<sup>73</sup> The assumption here is that external-world justification skepticism could be true while justification skepticism about patterns of (future) sense experiences is not.

that there is a giant boulder rolling in your direction, and hence it is compatible with your being reasonable in believing that there is a giant boulder heading in your direction. Hence, it seems that justification skepticism about the external world does *not* have implications for which action is the thing to do in this case.<sup>74</sup>

As successful as this line of reasoning might be in the case of the giant boulder, the trouble is that it is not *generally* successful. In fact, it is successful only in a very limited range of cases. Here is one of the many cases in which the above strategy will not work. Suppose that you receive a Christmas bonus and have to decide whether to spend the money on a fast new car or give the money to a charity that urgently needs it. Given the reasonable-belief principle, which of these is the thing to do depends on what it is reasonable to believe. In particular, it depends on whether it is reasonable to believe things like:

1. If you give the money to the charity, then starving people will be fed; if you spend the money on a fast new car, you'll get to drive a fast new car.

Again, according to justification skepticism about the external world, those beliefs are not epistemically justified. But are they pragmatically justified?

Let's try the reasoning of two paragraphs back. Although given justification skepticism about the external world, you are not epistemically justified in believing anything about the 'external world' consequences of your believing/not believing (1), you are epistemically justified in believing certain things about the 'internal world' consequences of believing (1). Following the above line of reasoning, we'll then say this: you have epistemic justification for believing that your believing (1) will more likely result in your *having sensations as if* starving people are being fed than it will result in your

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<sup>74</sup> In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke can plausibly be read as offering such a response to skepticism about the external world (IV.xii.8).

*having sensations as if you're driving a fast car*, while your not believing (1) will be just as likely to result in either. But here's the rub: if you're like me, and you'd rather, all other things being equal, *have sensations as if you're driving a fast car* than *have sensations as if starving people are being fed*, then this pragmatically justifies you in *not* believing (1). It does not pragmatically justify you in believing (1). Hence, if justification skepticism about the external world is true, then you are neither epistemically nor pragmatically justified in believing (1), and hence you are not reasonable in believing (1). Justification skepticism about the external world thus has practical significance in this case.

Cases such as the last one are ubiquitous. They occur whenever, roughly speaking, the relative values we place on *sensations* (or 'internal-world' states of affairs) come apart from the relative values we place on the external-world states of affairs that we commonly believe are responsible for those sensations. Consider these: being loved vs having sensations as if one is loved, climbing Mount Everest vs having sensations as if climbing Mount Everest, talking to an old friend vs having sensations as if talking to an old friend. Given that the values we place on sensations nearly universally comes apart from the values we place on the external-world states of affairs that we believe are responsible for them, I conclude that justification skepticism about the external-world, given the reasonable-belief principle, has *drastic* practical significance.

Can we generalize from the case of justification skepticism about the external world? Do *all* forms of justification skepticism have practical significance? In the next section I will argue that the answer is 'no': all Kantian skepticisms are in a certain sense self-immunized for practical significance. Accordingly, it will come to light that we have been implicitly assuming the external-world justification skepticism at issue in this section was a *Cartesian* skepticism.

## **Section Six: The Practical *Insignificance* of Kantian Skepticisms**

Above I said that a Kantian skeptic is, by definition, one who accepts an argument of something like the following form:

1. We cannot grasp the proposition  $p$ .
2. Therefore, we cannot know/justifiably believe that  $p$ .

Let us call (1) the Kantian skeptic's *conceptual premise* and let us call (2) the Kantian skeptic's *skeptical thesis*.

My thesis in this section is that *if* the Kantian skeptic's conceptual premise is true, *then* her skeptical thesis has no practical significance.<sup>75</sup> In this way, Kantian skepticisms are self-immunized for practical significance.

Here, in its barest outline, is the argument for my thesis.

**Relevance.** Skepticism with respect to  $p$  has practical significance only if  $p$  is a subjunctive conditional  $A \square \rightarrow O$  such that  $A$  is an action that is (sometimes) available to us and  $O$  is an outcome upon which we place some value.<sup>76,77</sup>

**Kantian Irrelevance.** If a Kantian conceptual premise with respect to  $p$  is true, then  $p$  is not a subjunctive conditional  $A \square \rightarrow O$  such that  $A$  is an action that is (sometimes) available to us and  $O$  is an outcome upon which we place some value.

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<sup>75</sup> Below I'll quickly show (1) why we cannot drop the antecedent from my thesis and (2) why the Kantian's *conceptual premise* itself might have practical significance.

<sup>76</sup> A skepticism with respect to  $p$ , as I am using the phrase, is any view that entails that we cannot know/justifiably believe that  $p$ . Thus, a skepticism need not be *explicitly* about  $p$  to be a skepticism with a respect to  $p$ .

<sup>77</sup> 'Value' is used generally here to include *negative values* as well as *positive values*.

**My Thesis.** Therefore, if a Kantian's conceptual premise is true, her skeptical thesis has no practical significance.

The argument is clearly valid; let's consider the premises.

The formal argument for Relevance goes as follows. Recall the reasonable-belief principle and the definition of expected utility given above.

**The Reasonable-Belief Principle:** A is the thing for S to do if and only if A has highest expected utility given S's desires and the beliefs that it is *reasonable* for S to have.

$$U(A) = \sum_O P(A \square \rightarrow O)V(O)$$

The definition of expected utility entails that one's credence that *p* is relevant to which action has highest expected utility *only if* *p* is a subjunctive conditional  $A \square \rightarrow O$  such that A is an action available to the agent and O is an outcome upon which she places some value. This, together with the reasonable-belief principle, entails that which action is the thing to do depends on the reasonableness of having a certain credence that *p*, *only if* *p* is a subjunctive conditional  $A \square \rightarrow O$  such that A is an action available to the agent and O is an outcome upon which she places some value. This, generalized to all of us, is just what Relevance says.

That's the formal argument. Let's make it more intuitive. Consider a proposition *p* such that, were we not thinking carefully about these matters, we might think that which action was the thing to do *did* depend on the reasonableness of having a certain credence that *p*. For example, let *p* be the proposition that the restaurant is to the right and suppose you're at a fork in the road, trying to get to the restaurant. We might, were we not thinking clearly about these matters, think that which action was the thing to do depends (in part) on whether it is reasonable to believe that the restaurant is to the right.

But here is why this isn't quite right. Typically, when it is reasonable to believe that the restaurant is to the right, it will also be reasonable to believe that were you to go to the right, then you would get to the restaurant. In those cases, the thing to do will be to go to the right. However, there are possible situations where it is perfectly reasonable to believe all three of the following: (1) that the restaurant is to the right, (2) that were you to go to the right you would *not* get to the restaurant (say, because of a roadblock), and (3) that were you to go to the left you would get to the restaurant (say, because of a detour). In *this* situation, the thing to do is to go to the left. Hence, we can see that which action is the thing to do does not track the reasonableness of believing that the restaurant is to the right: it tracks the reasonableness of believing that *were you to go right, then you would get to the restaurant* (and similar subjunctive conditionals). This is just what standard (causal) decision theory predicts, and it is just what Relevance says.

What about the second premise of the argument, Kantian Irrelevance? The argument for this premise is trickier. It's premised on a pair of principles I call

**The Action-Grasping Principle.** If S has no *grasp* on A, then A is not one of the actions *available* to S.

**The Outcome-Grasping Principle.** If S has no *grasp* on O, then the agent cannot place a value on O.

In slogan form, these principles simply say that we cannot *do* nor *want* what we cannot *grasp*.

Let's consider the action-grasping principle first. The following case should illustrate its plausibility.

Cory is a small child who knows nothing about electricity, yet knows that his toy car needs a new battery. Now he's faced with a choice as to which way to install

the battery. Question: is *put the positive electrode to the right* one of the actions available to him—that is, is put the positive electrode to the right something that he can *intend* to do?

The answer, it seems, is ‘no’. Of course, *put the side marked ‘+’ to the right* is probably one of the actions available to Cory. But it doesn’t seem that *put the positive electrode to the right* is something that Cory can intend to do, and hence it isn’t an action available to Cory in the sense of ‘available’ required by decision theory. But why is that not an action that Cory can intend to do? Cory cannot intend to *put the positive electrode to the right* because Cory has no *grasp* on what it would be to put the positive electrode to the right. This, generalized, is just what the action-grasping principle says.

How about the outcome-grasping principle? The following case should illustrate its plausibility.

Kathryn is trying to decide what to order for dinner. One of the items on the menu is sashimi. Kathryn, however, has never had sashimi, nor has she ever had anything that *tastes* anything like sashimi. Let O be the true, maximally specific proposition about what it is like to taste sashimi.

Question: is O a possible outcome upon which Kathryn can place some value? The answer, it seems, is ‘no’. Of course, Kathryn can place a value on the outcome *experiencing whatever taste it is that one experiences upon tasting sashimi*. But that is not the same as placing a value on O, and, having never tasted sashimi nor anything like sashimi, it doesn’t seem that Kathryn can place a value on O. (The difference between O and *experiencing whatever taste it is that one experiences upon tasting sashimi* is similar to the difference between *meeting Barack Obama* and *meeting the president, whoever he is*.) Now why can’t Kathryn place a value on O? Kathryn cannot place a value on O because



Kathryn has no *grasp* on O. This, generalized, is just what the outcome-grasping principle says.

Together, the two grasping principles entail the second premise of our argument, which I repeat here for convenience:

**Kantian Irrelevance.** If a Kantian conceptual premise with respect to  $p$  is true, then  $p$  is not a subjunctive conditional  $A \square \rightarrow O$  such that  $A$  is action that is (sometimes) available to us and  $O$  is an outcome upon which we place some value.

Suppose that some Kantian's conceptual premise is true with respect to some proposition  $p$ . Now, either  $p$  is a subjunctive conditional or it isn't. If it isn't, then the consequence of the second premise is true. If it is a subjunctive conditional, then it is a subjunctive conditional such that we do not grasp that subjunctive conditional (by the assumption that the Kantian's conceptual premise is true). But that could be the case *only if* we either do not grasp its antecedent *or* we do not grasp its consequent. But this entails, together with the grasping principles, that either the action appearing in the antecedent is not an action available to us or the outcome appearing in the consequent is not an outcome upon which we place some value. In other words, the consequent of Kantian Irrelevance is true. Hence, the grasping principles entail Kantian Irrelevance.

With Relevance and Kantian Irrelevance in place, our argument for the practical insignificance of Kantian skepticisms is complete.<sup>78</sup> Combining this result with the result

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<sup>78</sup> Given this conclusion, note that in the preceding section we must have been assuming that the external-world skepticism under consideration was a Cartesian skepticism. If we had instead been dealing with a Kantian skepticism about the external world, we would not have been entitled to assume that we place values on, for example, the state of affairs in which starving people are being fed. So what we were really seeing in the previous section was an example of a *Cartesian* skepticism that has practical significance. This of course does not prove that *all* Cartesian skepticisms have practical significance. But it does prove that some

of the previous section gives the conclusion that only justification-Cartesian skepticism have practical significance.

Type of Skepticism	Practical Significance?
Knowledge-Cartesian	No
Knowledge-Kantian	No
Justification-Cartesian	Some
Justification-Kantian	No

But I must stress two things. First, our conclusion about Kantian skepticisms is a conditional: *if* the Kantian's conceptual premise is true, *then* the Kantian's skeptical conclusion has no practical significance. Second, our conclusion is *not* that the Kantian's conceptual premise has no practical significance. In fact, there are reasons to think it often will have practical significance. Let me briefly say why.

Consider the case of Kathryn above. In such a case, it seems that a Kantian conceptual premise is true: Kathryn has no grasp on  $p$ , such that  $p$  is the true proposition about what it's like to taste sashimi. As we have established, *given* this conceptual premise, the *skeptical* conclusion that Kathryn does not know/justifiably believe that  $p$ , has no practical significance. However, the conceptual claim itself might have practical significance. Because Kathryn cannot grasp  $p$ , she will not be able to place a value on tasting sashimi (in accordance with the outcome grasping principle says). This will typically mean that the expected utility of, say, *ordering sashimi* will be indeterminate, which will in turn mean that it is indeterminate which action has highest expected utility. However, if she *could* grasp  $p$ , then Kathryn could place a value on tasting sashimi and then there would be some determinate action or set of actions with highest expected utility.

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Cartesian skepticisms have practical significance, and that all Cartesian skepticism at least have the potential for practical significance in a way that no Kantian skepticism ever could.

In this way, Kathryn's not being able to grasp  $p$  itself has practical significance—that is, the Kantian skeptic's conceptual premise *itself* has practical significance. But none of this, of course, undermines our claim that if the Kantian conceptual premise is true, the Kantian *skeptical conclusion* has no practical significance.

### **Section Seven: A Happy Ending**

I'd like to conclude on a pleasant note. Take some proposition  $p$ . We've distinguished four skeptical attitudes one might have towards a belief that  $p$  and seen that only one of these types has practical significance. But note this: the type of skepticism with practical significance—justification-Cartesian skepticism—is the *easiest* type of skepticism to refute.

Why is justification-Cartesian skepticism the easiest type of skepticism to refute? The justification-Cartesian skeptic allows that we can conceive of  $p$ , but merely denies that we can be justified in believing that  $p$ . In our attempts at refuting the justification-Cartesian skepticism we are thus allowed to assume that we can grasp  $p$ . This makes the task of showing that we are justified in believing that  $p$  against the justification-Cartesian skeptic considerably easier than the task of showing that we are justified in believing that  $p$  against the justification-Kantian skeptic. To show that we are justified in believing that  $p$  against the justification-Kantian skeptic requires a sort of *preliminary* step—showing that we can grasp  $p$ —without which there is presumably no hope in showing that we are justified in believing that  $p$ . In short, one who would attempt to refute justification-Cartesian skepticism has a sort of *dialectical* advantage over one who would try to refute justification-Kantian skepticism.

Moreover, refuting either kind of knowledge skepticism entails (on the assumption that knowledge is sufficient for justification) a refutation of either kind of justification skepticism. Thus, one who would attempt to refute either kind of justification skepticism has a sort of *logical* advantage over one who would attempt to refute either kind of

knowledge skepticism. But a logical advantage is a dialectical advantage, and hence the opponent of either type of justification skepticism has a dialectical advantage over the opponent of either type of knowledge skepticism.

So our situation is a happy one: the only type of skepticism with practical significance is, dialectically at least, the easiest skepticism to refute. Conversely: the only type of skepticism with practical significance is, dialectically at least, the *hardest skepticism to defend*.

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