Greco's New Anti-Pyrrhonism 

In a stimulating recent paper, Daniel Greco argues that skepticism is impossible, and that indeed the skeptic can be refuted by a non-circular argument that runs free of epistemically contentious premises. Here I contend that at most Greco establishes far less than this, that in fact his argument relies on seriously contentious premises, and that even if those premises are granted the argument does not go through.

1.

Greco's target is the skeptic who takes the possibility of various skeptical scenarios to entail that we ought to maintain a near-global suspension of belief.[1] He then argues that such near-global agnosticism is impossible, on the grounds that the only workable accounts of our doxastic attitudes are pragmatic in character, which is to say that they treat such attitudes as entailing certain behavioral dispositions and desires. Because the would-be skeptic cannot coherently exhibit any such behavior, it is impossible to suspend belief in the way that skepticism recommends. But because we should accept in this context the formula that ought implies can, it is therefore not the case that we ought to suspend belief. The skeptic has been refuted.

Greco argues at length for why we should accept ought implies can in this particular context, and I will not challenge that part of his argument. Even granting that, there is trouble enough here.

My first observation is that Greco's target is not broad enough to license his conclusion that

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[1] On the skeptic's behalf, Greco exempts beliefs concerning the contents of our own minds, as well as necessary truths such as those found in logic and mathematics (318). Since nothing here will turn on those exemptions, I will often write as if the skeptic's agnosticism is perfectly global.

Throughout, bare numerical citations are to the page numbers of Greco (2012).

"skeptical views in epistemology can be refuted without drawing on considerations from within epistemology proper" (353). His quarry, as he recognizes, is a skeptic of a rather exotic kind, traditionally known as the Pyrrhonian, who maintains not just that we have no knowledge but also that recognition of this fact should lead us to suspend our beliefs. Greco admits early on (320) that skepticism might be formulated without Pyrrhonism's distinctive agnosticism. This concession ought to temper severely the strength of Greco's conclusion, even supposing his argument were wholly successful. Ancient Pyrrhonism represents quite an unusual position in the history of skepticism – according to Myles Burnyeat (1980, 21), it is "the only serious attempt in Western thought to carry skepticism to its furthest limits and to live by the result." The skeptic today is much more likely to distinguish between the sort of grounds that are good enough to guide belief and action and the sort of grounds sufficient for knowledge.[2] Inasmuch as Greco's argument is aimed entirely at the possibility of suspending belief, it must remain silent with regard to most modern forms of skepticism. In particular, although one might suppose that a refutation of skepticism would amount to a proof that we possess knowledge, Greco neither can nor does claim any such thing.

Greco makes two suggestions about how to bridge the gap from Pyrrhonism to skepticism

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[2] Peter Unger (1975), for instance – and of course there are not many other instances to be had – takes skepticism to follow from our "impossibly demanding concept of knowledge." Rather than suppose that we should radically change how we live, he argues we should "break out of this … tremendous involvement with our language … [and] devise alternative locutions…" (246-47).Looking back farther, Descartes's First Meditation (1984) cautions that although skeptical arguments pose an obstacle to knowledge in its ideal form, they should not be regarded as an obstacle to belief. Our habitual opinions "are doubtful in a way, but are nevertheless highly probable, and are such that it is much more reasonable to believe than to deny them" (VII:22).

Much of Greco's argument turns on ascribing to the skeptic the characteristic Pyrrhonist idea that, for any given proposition, we have no more reason to affirm it than to deny it (see, e.g., 325 note 12). As the above two examples show, this view is not mandatory among skeptics.

in general. One is that skeptics are committed to Pyrrhonism if they hold, as skeptics "typically" have, that "their case extends to justified belief" (320). It is not obvious, however, that the sort of justification that licenses knowledge is equivalent to what licenses belief. Certainly, one might think that, but there are also many reasons for dissenting from that view. One might, for instance, think that we have enough evidence for belief but not enough for knowledge. Alternatively, one might think that although we have no good evidential basis for our beliefs, we ought nevertheless to maintain those beliefs on pragmatic or other grounds. Or one might think, as Greco himself suggests at one point (352), that our lack of justification makes it permissible to believe anything. As long as it is open to the skeptic to take these positions, it cannot be said that skepticism has been refuted.

Greco's other gap-bridging suggestion appeals to recent attempts to identify "close connections between what we know and what we ought to believe," and in a note he appeals, inter alia, to Timothy Williamson's thesis that one ought to believe only what one knows (Williamson 2000, ch. 11). If accepted, this principle would turn all skeptics into Pyrrhonists, but the principle has been widely doubted, and seems poorly suited in the present context to bear the weight required of it. In effect, Greco is proposing to reach a general refutation of skepticism as follows:

1. The would-be skeptic cannot suspend all belief (Greco's first result)

2. Ought implies can (Greco's second result)

∴ 3. It is not the case that the would-be skeptic ought to suspend all belief (from 1 and 2)

4. One ought to believe only what one knows (Williamson)

∴ 5. If one knows nothing, one ought to suspend all belief (from 4)

∴ 6. It is not the case that the would-be skeptic knows nothing (from 3 and 5).

This does give us a valid argument against skepticism in its most general form, construed as the thesis that no one knows anything. But even readers friendly enough to Greco to embrace his initial

two premises will surely balk at going all the way to 6. For it seems quite absurd to think that the mere impossibility of shedding all belief could yield a proof along these lines that we possess knowledge. If this argument shows anything, it seems to establish by *reductio* the falsity of 4. I say that this is "in effect" Greco's argument, but in fact he never explicitly offers anything of the kind and, as noted already, never claims to arrive at anything like 6. He could not credibly claim to have proved that we have knowledge, because his argument could not plausibly be taken to furnish the materials for any such thing. To that extent, he has not refuted skepticism.

2.

Although Pyrrhonism is a more limited target than Greco admits, it is certainly a worthy target. For one might well think that whether we have knowledge is worth arguing about only to the extent that knowledge connects with belief and action. So rather than carp any further over what Greco has not achieved, let us focus on how well his refutation of Pyrrhonism fares.

The heart of his paper consists in arguing, first, that the only promising candidates for a theory of doxastic attitudes are pragmatic in character, and, second, that on theories of this form would-be skeptics cannot hold the agnostic attitudes they are supposed to hold. Putting aside the second of these claims until the next section, I will here consider Greco's version of the pragmatic theory.[3] He sets out that theory as follows:

> The two principles I will use to argue against the possibility of skepticism are the *weak rationalization principle* (WRP) and the *strong rationalization principle* (SRP).
>
> If *S* has a set of doxastic attitudes *B*, then

[3] For the sake of brevity, I discuss only what Greco calls the "direct" pragmatic approach, ignoring the "indirect" approach. This is enough, since his argument concerning the indirect approach depends on his argument for the direct approach, and since his conclusions concerning the indirect approach are much weaker than his conclusions concerning the direct approach. In focusing on the latter, then, I attack Greco on his strongest ground.

> WRP: *B* rationalizes some of *S*'s behavioral dispositions together with *S*'s desires.
>
> SRP: There is no proper subset $B' \subset B$ such that B' rationalizes S's behavioral dispositions just as well as *B*, together with S's desires. (321)

The main idea is to understand belief and other doxastic attitudes in terms of the conjunction of behaviors and desires an agent holds. To have a belief requires that one (have a disposition to)[4] behave in a rational way, given one's other beliefs and desires. Principles of this general kind have been offered mainly as theories of intentionality – that is, they hope to explain what it is for an agent to have a belief *with a certain content* – and they derive their appeal through avoiding the need to relate believers to some sort of obscure linguistic entity that is the content of their belief. Greco's argument, however, requires that the pragmatic approach bear its full weight as a theory of doxastic attitudes – that is, as an account of what it is for an agent to *have a belief*. To be sure, this is part of what pragmatic accounts aspire to do, but it seems fair to say that this aspect of the theory, at least in Greco's hands, is underdeveloped. What do we say, for instance, about a chronically akratic agent who genuinely believes that *p* but repeatedly fails to act on that belief? What about an agent who has newly come to believe that *p* but whose behavioral dispositions have not yet had time to change? Or what about an agent pursuing something like Pascal's wager: someone who wants *p* to be the case and acts in all respects as if *p* is the case, but yet has not yet managed to believe *p*? In all of these cases, the pragmatic approach seems to get the wrong result, inasmuch as the doxastic attitude we take the agent to have does not rationalize the agent's behavior. One could hug each of these monsters by embracing the Socratic dismissal of akrasia, denying that beliefs can be acquired faster than our behavioral dispositions can change, and insisting that someone who develops the thoroughgoing disposition to act as if *p* just is, *eo ipso*, a believer in *p*. But these look like desperate

[4] Greco does not always distinguish sharply between behavior and dispositions to behave, and I will follow his practice in that regard.

measures.

A different difficulty for the pragmatic approach arises from the privileged access we have to our own belief states. To say that such access is privileged is not to say that it is infallible or omniscient, only that each of us is ordinarily in a better position than others, when it comes to identifying our own beliefs. Greco's two principles can make a start at explaining this asymmetry, inasmuch as a similar privilege arguably holds with regard to behavioral dispositions. But the pragmatic approach needs to say much more than this. For consider the phenomenon sometimes known as the transparency of thought, which Gareth Evans has characterized as follows:

> If someone asks me "Do you think there is going to be a third world war?", I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question "Will there be a third world war?" I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that *p* by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether *p*. (Evans 1982, 225)

It seems beyond doubt that we do often figure out what we believe in just the way Evans describes: simply by asking ourselves whether such a thing is true. The pragmatic approach might try to account for this phenomenon by treating our answer to the question as the manifestation of a behavioral disposition. But Greco's account leaves us no way to give this particular disposition any special status in determining what an agent believes. If I try to decide whether I believe *p* by asking myself whether *p*, then, as Greco would have it, I must be cautious in interpreting the result. For although it may now look as if I do believe *p*, I cannot really regard myself as having good evidence to that effect until I work through WRP and SRP and determine whether they point toward some more satisfactory account of my doxastic attitudes. This seems absurd – it should not be that hard, at least in ordinary cases, to figure out what I believe. Evans puts the case too strongly when he goes on to say that

> If a judging subject applies this procedure, then necessarily he will gain knowledge of one of his own mental states: even the most determined sceptic cannot find here a gap in which to insert his knife. (225)

This goes too far, at least if Evans means to say that the method provides full-proof access to our beliefs. For it is a commonplace that I can be self-deceived, even for considerable stretches of time, and tell myself things that I do not in fact believe. One of the strengths of the pragmatic approach is that it offers a wide-scope test of belief possession, in terms of both behavior and desire. Still, even if Evans's procedure is not infallible, it plainly deserves a certain privileged status in determining what an agent believes. The reason it looks desperate to deny the possibility of akrasia, for instance, or equate the Pascalian regime with belief, is that in both cases we can imagine agents who repeatedly ask themselves whether *p*, and find that their answers remain persistently and frustratingly out of sync with their behavior. It strains credibility, in each case, to insist that these people do not believe what they take themselves to believe.[5]

I do not mean to suggest that the behavioral approach is hopeless, only that Greco's sketch would need considerable development to get anywhere with familiar phenomena pertaining to the ascription of belief. But if Greco's sketch does not work, then his argument does not work, because the whole argument turns on wielding that sketch to show that the skeptic cannot suspend belief. If the sketch yields the wrong results in cases like the above, there is no reason for confidence that it will go right in the skeptic's case. To make this more vivid, allow me a brief vignette. Suppose that Professor Greco is lecturing on Pyrrhonism to a bright group of students, and is in fact so passionate and effective that he inspires one of those students to continue the discussion after class:

> Professor (cautiously). So, you thought that was pretty interesting stuff?
>
> Yalie (enthusiastically). Yeah, like, you know, I never really thought about it before, but the more you said, the more I realized that I just really am a skeptic.
>
> Professor (discretely looking at his watch). Really?
>
> Yalie (with increasing enthusiasm). Yeah, so, like when you talked about how nothing is certain? And that if we can't be certain then we shouldn't believe? So, ok, that just really seems true to me.

[5] On transparency see Moran (2001) and a series of recent papers by Alex Byrne, e.g. Byrne (2011).

Professor (reluctantly). Well, I can see how you thought that. But you see I have this paper….

Yalie (impetuously). And so like I just keep thinking about all these things I believe. Or used to believe. And now I just think, you know, that I just don't believe them anymore.

Professor (firmly). You can't do that.

Yalie (determinedly). Look, I know it's going to be really hard, ok? But you've made me see that I just don't know anything. And so I'm just going to stop believing these things I don't know.

No doubt it will be a hard road for our student, on any conception of belief. But suppose she comes back the following week and informs Greco that she is still a skeptic, and that moreover she has succeeded in abandoning all belief. There are the familiar threats to coherence that plague any self-processed skeptic. But suppose we are dealing with a seriously clever student who, under close examination, manages to put forth a credible version of Pyrrhonism. Greco would then have to bring to bear the full force of his anti-Pyrrhonist weaponry, and argue that we cannot make any sense of the student's new doxastic attitudes because there is no behavior those attitudes could rationalize. But, however we assess the details of that argument, it seems very hard to accept a theory of belief that forces us to discard completely the student's own reports about her doxastic attitudes.

One way forward at this point would be to postulate – as the opponents of folk psychology have long urged – that belief is more variegated than our language suggests. Perhaps we should find a way to distinguish between different notions of belief, and allow that our student in one sense has given up her beliefs, but in another sense has not. (We might also want to say this about akrasia.) Alternatively, and even more concessively, we might just yield to Greco the word 'belief,' and admit that what the student is doing, although in some ways admirable, does not amount to any change in her doxastic attitudes. These moves grant more to Greco than he perhaps deserves. Even so, neither move helps him very much. For as long as we agree that our clever young Pyrrhonian is doing *something* – call it what you will – we have to admit the possibility of doing that thing, which then

opens the door to the question of whether we ought to do that thing. My imaginary Yalie is doing what the Pyrrhonian skeptics of old wanted us to do, something that looks a lot like suspending belief. Maybe it is a bad idea; maybe it does not really amount to suspending belief. But, call it what you will, it does not seem to be impossible. Pyrrhonism thus stands unrefuted.

3.

Suppose we can find a satisfactory formulation of the pragmatic account of belief. Then it becomes incumbent on us to look more carefully at how that account makes it impossible for the would-be skeptic to suspend belief. Here is Greco's master argument, in his own words:

> Premise 1. If the direct pragmatic picture is correct, then if a subject has a set of doxastic attitudes *B*, those attitudes rationalize the subject's behavior.
>
> Premise 2. No body of behavior could be rationalized by the near-global agnosticism recommended by the skeptical epistemologist. Therefore:
>
> Conclusion: If the direct pragmatic picture is correct, no subject could have the attitudes recommended by the skeptical epistemologist. (323)

The argument is valid, and Premise 1 follows from the pragmatic account. The core argument for Premise 2 runs as follows:

> [I]n order for an agent *S*'s attitudes to rationalize an action, *S* must both have some desires and believe that in acting in a particular way, *S* will be likely to satisfy those desires.[6] But if *S* believes that if *S* acts in a certain way, then *S* will satisfy *S*'s desires (or at least will be more likely to do so than if *S* acts in other ways), *S* is not agnostic about everything the skeptical epistemologist says they must be agnostic about. (323)

The idea is fairly simple. Doxastic attitudes, the pragmatic account tells us, must rationalize behavior. But rational action requires not only desires but also beliefs about the relationship between actions and desires. Without belief, action becomes, if not impossible, at least irrational. The Pyrrhonist

[6] Here Greco inserts a note warning that a complete account of these matters would account for *degrees* of belief and desire. I will follow his lead in suppressing this complication.

cannot tolerate that outcome, however, because Pyrrhonism recommends a set of doxastic attitudes, and such attitudes, the pragmatic account once again tells us, require rational behavior.

The general line of argument here is familiar – it is, indeed, the oldest and most familiar of criticisms made against the skeptic. David Hume remarked that if Pyrrhonian principles were accepted, then "all discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence" (2000, XII.2). Pyrrho himself was legendarily said to have tried this: "In his life he followed [his skepticism]; he avoided nothing, took no precautions, but faced all risks, carts, precipices, dogs or whatever else it happened to be" (Diogenes Laertius 1925, IX.61). The implication of both discussions is that either one must live this way, and die, or else one must abandon Pyrrhonism. (Pyrrho, according to the legend, lived thanks to the guidance of his friends, "who always accompanied him.")

Greco, however, is doing something new. He is not making the familiar point that Pyrrhonism demands of us something that is wildly absurd or that transcends ordinary human nature, but that it demands something impossible as a matter of metaphysical necessity. The case of Pyrrho (if it were real, which no one believes) would be a counterexample to Hume's famous claim that our nature is incapable of sustained Pyrrhonism. Greco's argument, however, can account for the legend. Pyrrho either did or did not hold the doxastic attitudes that Pyrrhonism recommends. If he did not, then the game is over. If he did, then the pragmatic account tells us that he had to have harbored desires and beliefs that rationalized his behavior. Hence not even the Pyrrho of legend managed to suspend belief.

Greco's argument fails, however, for two reasons that hold quite apart from the doubts raised already about his pragmatic account of belief. *First*, the argument crucially relies on treating agnosticism as a doxastic attitude, analyzable in terms of the pragmatic approach. This, however, is unmotivated. To be sure, there is a difference between the Pyrrhonist's choice to suspend belief in *p*

and Fido the dog's failure ever to consider *p*. The Pyrrhonist is in an intentional state, with respect to *p*, and to some extent it is merely a terminological quibble whether we count this as a "doxastic" state. But if we do call it that, we should be clear that we are not supposing it to involve any belief. The Pyrrhonist neither believes nor disbelieves *p*, nor believes that *p* is equally likely to be true or false, nor perhaps believes even that she is suspending belief in *p*. If we are to take the Pyrrhonist at her word, as we should at this stage in the argument, then we must insist that her attitude toward *p* involves no belief whatsoever. Once we are clear about this, however, we should wonder whether it is right to subject this state to the pragmatic approach. Greco takes his mandate for this approach from Robert Stalnaker, whom he quotes as follows:

> [O]ur conception of belief and of attitudes pro and con are conceptions of states which explain why a rational agent does what he does. Some representational mental states – for example, idle wishes, passive hopes, and theoretical beliefs – may be connected only very indirectly with action, but all must be explained, according to the pragmatic picture, in terms of their connections with the explanation of rational action. (320, quoting Stalnaker 1984, 4)

This looks much like Greco's own picture except that all of Stalnaker's examples involve propositions being cognitively embraced as either true or desirable. In such cases the pragmatic approach has a great deal of appeal, and it is easy to see how the appeal extends to the negative counterparts of these states – believing-to-be-false and desiring-not-to-obtain. What Greco crucially needs, however, is that the theory be extended to cases where one is agnostic or indifferent. Without further argument, such an extension looks quite dubious.[7]

Second, premise two of the argument can be rejected. Greco's idea is that Pyrrhonian agnosticism cannot rationalize any behavior, no matter what desires we possess. It would not make

[7] Greco may suppose that the pragmatic approach will explain not only beliefs and desires but *all intentional states*. This is how Stalnaker (1984), for instance, conceives of the project. But the argument would evidently need to be developed significantly before it could be made persuasive that all intentional states rationalize some behavior.

it rational to bring an umbrella in the morning, or to leave the umbrella at home. It would not make it rational to think hard about epistemological questions, or to strive to adhere to the normative strictures of the Pyrrhonist. It would not make it rational to affirm Pyrrhonism, or deny it, or to say anything at all, inasmuch as all such behavior requires belief in order for it to be rational. The point again is not that these consequences for behavior are absurd, or even that they make the theory self-refuting, but rather that, without rationalized behavior, there can be no doxastic attitudes, not even skeptical ones.

To this the proper reply is that Pyrrhonism, to the extent its scope is global, to that extent makes all behavior rational. For if I have no beliefs about what results my actions are likely to bring about, then any course of action is as good as the next one. For someone in such a doxastic state, it is easy to be rational, because no course of action would be irrational. This looks to be precisely the position that the Pyrrhonists of old took themselves to be in. Sextus Empiricus, whose work gives us the fullest surviving account of the theory, explains that Pyrrhonists are able to act in the world by letting themselves be guided naturally, by the appearances which passively arise within them, for instance, and by the feelings of hunger and so forth that arise as a matter of natural necessity.[8] It is not that there is anything especially rational about these courses of action as opposed to others. The Pyrrhonist takes no position on that. But by following this procedure one can act in the world, and so live, without forming beliefs, and also without acting irrationally.

Now to this one might respond that rationality requires more than the absence of irrationality, and this would seem to be how Greco himself would reply. For he is careful when introducing the notion of rationalizing to add the proviso that a set of beliefs and desires rationalizes

[8] See Sextus Empiricus (2000), I.19-24. A fuller discussion of Sextus's views would need to consider his important distinction between belief and acceptance. Greco himself considers whether some such distinction might allow skepticism to be defended (sec. 1.1.2), but I set this interesting issue aside in the interests of brevity.

an action only if it rules out some other action (321). Presumably the point of this "terminological note" is to block the present objection. But the proviso begs the question. It is precisely the Pyrrhonists' contention that, as far as they can discern, all possible courses of action are equally good. That is the heart of their view. To label all action under such conditions non-rational, and then to insist that doxastic attitudes are possible only if they are manifested in rational action, does indeed yield a quick route to the impossibility of Pyrrhonism. That route seems so quick, however, as to be quite uninteresting.

One might suppose that Greco is in a stronger position here than I have allowed. For one might think that if the Pyrrhonist behaves as if it is going to rain, then that entails, on the pragmatic approach, that he believes it will rain. Game over. But Greco cannot draw this conclusion, because it runs his inferences in the wrong direction. Both his master argument (quoted at the start of this section) and his formulation of the pragmatic approach (quoted at the start of section 2) run from having a doxastic attitude toward rational behavior. The line of thought just suggested runs in the opposite direction, making a certain sort of behavior into a *sufficient* condition for a certain doxastic attitude. This is a direction of inference that Greco does not defend, and quite rightly so. After all, the pragmatic approach is hard enough to defend when understood as stating merely a necessary condition. To treat it as necessary and sufficient would be a Herculean task.[9] Accordingly, all that is required to defeat Greco's argument is to find *some* behavior that is rational given Pyrrhonian agnosticism. This is easily done, because any action whatsoever will do.

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[9] A task, one might note, that the Hercules of MIT does attempt to shoulder, when he remarks that "to believe that *P* is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to satisfy one's desires, whatever they are, in a world in which *P* (together with one's other beliefs) were true" (Stalnaker 1984, 15). Greco himself quotes this passage, and speaks elsewhere of "a close constitutive link between belief and action" (320-21). But he is scrupulous about running his argument in only the one direction.

Greco's core argument for Premise 2 holds (as quoted above) that rational action requires both a desire and a belief that the action is likely to satisfy the desire. We should deny this. Although it is a familiar and widely accepted account of rational agency, Greco gives us no reason to think it obtains in all cases. Moreover, having himself insisted that agnosticism should count as a doxastic attitude, he should here be willing to admit that agnosticism may sometimes rationalize action. Someone lost in the dark may have no beliefs about which direction to head, or even whether it is better to move or stay still. Such informational poverty does not render all action irrational, as Greco would have it; on the contrary, lack of information rationalizes *more* courses of action. Pyrrhonism is simply the most radical, limiting case of such ignorance. For the Pyrrhonist it is rational to behave as the Pyrrho of legend did, and it is equally rational to behave just as the neighbors do. The presence of so many equally eligible alternative actions makes it hard, admittedly, to see how one could rely on pragmatic considerations to understand doxastic attitudes. But so much the worse for the pragmatic approach. For just as surely as someone lost in the dark will have doxastic attitudes about the situation, so will the Pyrrhonist.

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