

## Research Statement

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I research skepticism in modern and contemporary philosophy with a special focus on reviving Hume and Kant's often overlooked insights about the sources of skepticism. I think we cannot properly understand skepticism in the modern period without also understanding how philosophers of that period appropriated, questioned, and augmented the Hellenistic view that philosophy is medicine for the mind. The ancient skeptics saw themselves as offering methods for achieving psychological tranquility, which in turn was to support social harmony. Many modern philosophers, too, approached skepticism through a therapeutic lens, though they tended to complicate the picture by emphasizing skepticism's potential for harm when attaching to the wrong or too wide a target. Understanding this approach helps us see that, for the moderns, skepticism was not strictly an epistemological issue, but one of great relevance to personal and societal well-being—so, in other words, to ethics and politics. It also encourages us to integrate treatments of skepticism with developments in the history of medicine and psychology.

My work seeks to revive this therapeutic approach in discussions of both contemporary and modern skepticism. Below, I describe three overlapping research programs on Hume, on Kant, and on contemporary epistemology and philosophy of perception.

### Health and balance in Hume's epistemology and ethics

Drawing on the widespread but neglected allusions to medicine throughout Hume's writings, I argue in a series of papers that a notion of health as a kind of balance is central to both Hume's epistemology and his ethics. "**The Humors in Hume's Skepticism**" (forthcoming in *Ergo*) argues that Hume draws heavily on the humoral theory of ancient and medieval medicine in his discussions of skepticism. According to that theory, health consists in a proper balance of humors and corresponding temperaments. Hume's likening of skepticism to a humor or temperament at the end of Book I of the *Treatise* then explains why he thinks it can be both a "malady" and a medicine. It also explains skepticism's proper treatment—management through counterbalance by the other temperaments. Rather than defending or rejecting skepticism, I argue, Hume *tempers* or moderates it. On his view, a properly functioning mind incorporates a moderate degree of the skeptical temperament, while avoiding excess.

A second, related paper, "**Hume's Real Riches**," argues that this notion of health as a balance of temperaments reappears in Hume's essays and letters. In the autobiographical essay "My Own Life," for instance, Hume praises his own "mild dispositions" and "cheerful and sanguine temper" over the gifts of fame and fortune, suggesting that he views the good life as requiring a balanced temperament. That this is Hume's view provides a clue to reading his four essays on philosophical characters, and provides new evidence that one of these, "The Sceptic," is narrated largely, though not entirely, in Hume's own voice.

A third paper, “**A Humean Virtue Epistemology**,” surveys various interpretations of epistemic virtue in Hume. I argue that if Hume has a theory of epistemic virtue, it contrasts starkly with contemporary virtue reliabilism, and even with Hume’s own theory of moral virtue in Book III of the *Treatise*. It is instead of a broadly Aristotelian sort, foregrounding the notions of balance and health or proper functioning. The result is a novel theory of epistemic virtue as a mean between dogmatism and skepticism. This theory is absent from the contemporary literature, but promises to help address perennial issues in epistemology, e.g., about the role of skepticism in epistemically virtuous belief.

A fourth paper, “**Hume and Cheyne**,” argues that Hume read and was influenced by the popular medical works of the Scottish doctor and natural philosopher George Cheyne. I present novel evidence for the controversial view that Hume’s 1734 letter to an anonymous physician was intended for Cheyne. I argue that Hume adopted Cheyne’s critical attitude toward luxury or extravagance, which then encouraged Hume’s concern with the limitations of ‘idle’ pursuits such as philosophy.

### How Kant can reach skeptics

A central topic of my dissertation is Kant’s strategy for convincing a skeptical empiricist of the findings of his critical philosophy. There, I argued for two core ideas. The first is that Kant does not intend to refute skeptical empiricists like Hume, but to offer them a so far neglected *explanation* of the knowledge which they deny we can have. The second is that Kant thinks even skeptics remain necessarily interested in an explanation of our knowledge. I develop these core ideas in the first two papers described below. The third draws some implications for contemporary epistemology.

In “**The Explanatory Reading of the Transcendental Deduction**,” I take seriously Kant’s often overlooked definition of a transcendental deduction as “the explanation [*Erklärung*] of the manner in which concepts can. . . relate *a priori* to objects” (A85/B117). This definition is one of Kant’s many portrayals of his transcendental deduction of the categories as a kind of *explanation*. To determine what kind of explanation Kant takes the transcendental deduction to be, I look to some understudied parts of his corpus: the Discipline of Pure Reason and the logic lectures. Doing so, I argue, teaches us what is distinctive about critical philosophy, how we come to know its findings, and why Kant does not consider it to be a substantive doctrine. It also helps to resolve perennial puzzles about the second edition deduction’s argumentative structure.

Reading the transcendental deduction as a kind of explanation is novel in part because the deduction’s apparent form has long suggested a contrasting reading—namely, that the deduction is meant to expose an inconsistency within skeptical empiricism. I argue against such a reading in “**Kant’s Offer to the Skeptical Empiricist**.” On my reading, the deduction is meant to develop and *offer*, rather than compel, Kant’s alternative conception of our knowledge. Kant was right, I argue, to think that his offer could appeal to the skeptic, given his shrewd understanding of the nature and sources of skeptical empiricism. According to Kant, this skepticism arises from a frustration with the failures of traditional metaphysicians, but nonetheless cannot successfully purge an innate human drive to ask

metaphysical questions. Kant's offer can appeal to the skeptic because it provides her with a way to resolve the frustration of this drive. Relatedly, the skeptic's felt dissatisfaction can allow her to dissociate from her empiricism sufficiently to entertain the alternative conception of our knowledge developed in Kant's deduction. She can then grasp the possibility of the knowledge which she previously denied we can have.

A third paper, "**Transcendental Cures for Skepticism**," responds to doubts about the viability of so-called 'transcendental' arguments for addressing skepticism. Such arguments attempt to show that some state of affairs obtains on the grounds that it must obtain if we are so much as to think or experience at all. Skeptics reply that transcendental arguments can only show something weaker—namely, that *our believing that* the state of affairs obtains is a precondition on thought or experience. I argue that this finding may still be exploited to change a skeptic's mind, when supplemented with another staple of Kant's philosophy: a plausible "ought implies can" principle. We cannot have a rational obligation to doubt something we *must* believe in order to think or experience anything.

### Responses to skepticism about perceptual knowledge

Many philosophers now think there is no use in trying to change a skeptic's mind. In a third series of papers, I argue, against this trend, that responses to skepticism can successfully convince a wide variety of skeptics. In "**The Groundlessness of Skepticism**," I offer a three-part cure for external world skepticism. First, I argue that influential skeptical arguments rely on a shared, tacit premise—namely, that perception never guarantees that things are as we seem to perceive them to be. Next, I argue that the best arguments for this premise are question-begging. Lastly, I offer an alternative view of perception that avoids skepticism. This alternative view, I explain, can be made palatable to the skeptic as soon as he is shown the groundlessness of his skeptical position.

In a paper called "**Neo-Mooreanism**," I assess several contemporary responses to skepticism which have been likened to Moore's notorious proof of the external world. These include Jim Pryor's dogmatism and the epistemic disjunctivism advanced by John McDowell and others. I argue that G.E. Moore's proof fails to impress because it offers no diagnosis of why skepticism can seem rationally compelling. I then argue that the same is true of the more recent responses without appended diagnoses. While this is damning for dogmatism, it leaves epistemic disjunctivism comparatively unscathed, for only the latter pairs naturally with a diagnosis of skepticism.

Finally, in "**The Breadth of the Disjunctive Response to Skepticism**," I reply to the criticism that disjunctivism cannot respond to as wide a variety of skeptics as its proponents make it out to. Duncan Pritchard, for example, has argued that while disjunctivism provides an adequate reply to underdetermination-based skepticism, it fails as a reply to closure-based skepticism. The latter, he thinks, calls for a Wittgenstenian response. I argue, first, that Pritchard's two responses are incompatible and, second, that if the disjunctivist response adequately answers either kind of skepticism, it must adequately answer both.