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# A Process Theory of Wisdom

Jipeng He

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## THESE

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**Jipeng HE**

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## **A Process Theory of Wisdom**

Une théorie du processus de la sagesse

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Devant le jury composé de :

Professeure Isabelle PARIENTE-BUTTERLIN, Aix-Marseille Université  
Professeur Pierre STEINER, Université de technologie de Compiègne  
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# THESIS

in order to obtain the degree of Doctor, awarded by  
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Publicly defended on 29/03/2024, by:

**HE Jipeng**

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## A Process Theory of Wisdom

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## Résumé

Cette thèse examine la sagesse en se focalisant sur la littérature épistémologique anglophone contemporaine qui y a été récemment consacrée. Malgré la complexité de ce sujet, son objectif est d'en éclairer un aspect particulièrement intéressant : la normativité épistémique du concept de sagesse. Elle explore l'attente que « sage » et « sagesse » désignent constamment la même caractéristique dans différents contextes, comme dans les exemples opposés de la sagesse recluse d'un ermite et de la sagesse mondaine d'un leader social. Cela conduit à des discussions épistémologiques sur la façon dont le concept de sagesse « devrait » être reconnu et appliqué, en particulier dans des activités épistémiques telles que la compréhension et l'évaluation de l'obtention de la sagesse par un individu, et qui est également significativement influencé par l'état épistémique de l'agent.

L'exploration d'une interprétation plausible de la sagesse eu égard à sa normativité épistémique commence par un examen du relativisme épistémique, qui tente de concilier des concepts de sagesse contradictoires. L'examen révèle une tendance implicite de second ordre sous-jacente aux débats épistémologiques explicites de premier ordre en faveur des théories qui aident à préserver les pratiques épistémiques couronnées de succès. Cette tendance suggère de mettre de côté les théories incompatibles comme le relativisme épistémique et de voir la pratique linguistique épistémique comme un facilitateur au sein du processus épistémique général. Cette compréhension du processus implique à la fois une proposition de théoriser les notions épistémiques sur la base du discours épistémique dominant et une défense contre les critiques de la dépendance de cette proposition vis-à-vis de l'expérience passée. Dans cette optique, la thèse développe une théorie de la sagesse comme processus fondée sur l'idée établie de poursuite de la vérité en épistémologie, et positionnant la sagesse comme le but ultime du processus épistémique. Elle préconise d'interpréter l'utilisation de « sage/sagesse » comme désignant principalement des résultats épistémiques idéaux du point de vue de la première personne. En y ajoutant certaines spécifications additionnelles, cette approche permet de traiter de manière satisfaisante le problème des conceptions contradictoires de la sagesse, ainsi que d'autres questions importantes soulevées par la sagesse.

**Mots-clés :** Sagesse, métaépistémologie, normativité épistémique, pratique épistémique

## Résumé Détaillé

Il existe différentes raisons d'étudier la sagesse. Une raison intuitive est que la sagesse est quelque chose de précieux que nous voulons naturellement comprendre et atteindre. Aussi une explication qui peut nous aider à la cerner est-elle également précieuse. Cette thèse examine principalement les discussions sur la sagesse menées par des auteurs contemporains anglophones et cherche à en fournir une théorie utile d'un point de vue épistémologique.

La thèse commence par présenter les attentes communes envers la sagesse, notamment celles identifiées dans la recherche empirique et philosophique. Ces attentes émergent de diverses perspectives : elles peuvent être proposées par des experts ou des profanes, à partir de points de vue à la première ou à la troisième personne, en se concentrant sur des problèmes généraux ou spécifiques à un domaine, etc. Un cadre commun pour des exigences plausibles envers les sages peut être établi à partir de l'examen de ces attentes. Il concerne trois phases majeures du processus épistémique individuel : développer de bonnes qualités pour les activités épistémiques, utiliser ces qualités pour apprendre et acquérir des résultats épistémiques souhaitables, et apprécier et accepter les résultats correspondants. Cependant, un phénomène déroutant devient perceptible au fur et à mesure de cette exploration et qui est qu'il semble y avoir des concepts contradictoires de la sagesse qui coexistent simultanément. Par exemple, un ermite peut être connu pour sa sagesse recluse qui nie fondamentalement la valeur de mener une vie ordinaire, tandis qu'un leader social peut être reconnu pour sa sagesse mondaine qui priorise l'importance d'une participation normale à la société. Bien que la théorie recherchée présuppose une compréhension unifiée de la sagesse, ces concepts semblent résister à une unification plus poussée, malgré le partage d'un certain cadre.

Une résolution possible et séduisante à ce problème est d'argumenter que ces concepts ne sont pas, en fait, contradictoires. Le relativisme, en particulier le relativisme épistémique, offre une solution de ce genre. Selon les relativistes épistémiques, les concepts épistémiques sont relatifs plutôt qu'absolus. Cela signifie que bien que les concepts de sagesse puissent sembler incompatibles lorsqu'ils sont mis ensemble, ils

peuvent être vrais respectivement à des normes particulières. La thèse examine deux approches prévalentes pour défendre le relativisme épistémique : l'approche traditionnelle qui considère le relativisme épistémique principalement comme une résolution aux désaccords épistémiques pratiquement indésirables, et l'approche non traditionnelle qui se concentre sur la puissance explicative avantageuse du relativisme épistémique dans l'interprétation des phénomènes épistémiques linguistiques. La traditionnelle suit généralement le raisonnement selon lequel les désaccords épistémiques insolubles sont inévitables et le relativisme épistémique sert de solution unique ou la plus utile. La nouvelle, de son côté, favorise le relativisme épistémique parce qu'il fournit l'explication la plus rationnelle de notre pratique linguistique épistémique. Ces deux approches échouent cependant à imposer le relativisme épistémique, mais suggèrent en même temps un changement de direction dans les débats, consistant à déporter l'attention de la justesse du relativisme épistémique ou de toutes les positions théoriques fonctionnellement similaires, à l'évaluation de leur capacité à faciliter et soutenir intellectuellement la manière dont nous parlons de la connaissance et des sujets pertinents, à savoir, le discours épistémique.

Pour l'essentiel, l'évolution consiste à déplacer l'accent vers la signification pratique. Alors que ce changement se produit en partie parce que différents points de vue ont atteint une impasse dans leur propre validation, il révèle également la possibilité de trouver une justification pratique, au lieu d'une justification purement théorique, pour soutenir une position. À travers ce prisme, la position reçue qui est effectivement adoptée dans notre pratique linguistique épistémique peut être fondée sur la confiance accumulée grâce à l'expérience passée de résultats épistémiques fructueux, car le discours épistémique contribue de manière significative au processus plus large des efforts épistémiques humains. En considération de cela, puisque notre discours épistémique est majoritairement formé d'affirmations absolues, le relativisme épistémique est moins justifié que l'absolutisme épistémique communément admis, qui croit qu'il n'y a qu'une seule vérité épistémique et qui correspond à notre mode de communication actuel.

Ces analyses suggèrent de traiter les problèmes épistémologiques en s'appuyant sur des positions conventionnellement acceptées. Néanmoins, cela ne signifie pas nécessairement les interprétations philosophiques prédominantes de celles-ci. Ce qui accompagne l'absolutisme épistémique est souvent la compréhension réaliste dominante

des affirmations épistémiques, qui présuppose l'existence de faits épistémiques disponibles pour que les jugements épistémiques puissent les refléter. Cette hypothèse s'avère extrêmement difficile à prouver et superflue lorsque l'utilisation du langage épistémique peut être rationalisée en termes de sa signification pratique dans le processus épistémique collectif plus large. Cette compréhension du processus du discours épistémique peut traiter des considérations telles que la façon dont les agents épistémiques sont motivés par des raisons épistémiques. Pourtant, elle repose fortement sur l'expérience passée de l'avancement épistémique, ce qui ne garantit pas le succès épistémique et la justification de l'utilisation continue du langage épistémique existant à l'avenir. Le souci sous-jacent devient pressant lorsque l'exigence pour le discours épistémique de fonctionner de manière fiable et compréhensible comme prévu est prise en compte. Cela dit, ces inquiétudes peuvent être résolues lorsque notre démarche épistémique est comprise comme un processus holistique que nous menons intimement et pouvons donc ajuster en fonction de la situation et de nos besoins pratiques. Une autre préoccupation que la compréhension du processus pourrait soulever est que l'absence de démonstration positive de la légitimité de notre pratique linguistique épistémique pourrait conduire à la cessation de l'engagement des agents épistémiques en raison du scepticisme extrême ainsi qu'à d'autres perspectives pessimistes. Cependant, cela ne constitue pas nécessairement un problème à prendre en considération, car l'attente que le langage épistémique soit significatif ou fructueux peut être abandonnée à la place d'être satisfaite.

En conséquence, la compréhension du processus du discours épistémique mène à une double conclusion : d'une part, il existe une raison pratiquement justifiable d'aborder les problèmes épistémiques en s'appuyant sur l'épistémologie dominante; d'autre part, les réponses ainsi obtenues ne sont pas garanties d'être correctes comme on pourrait traditionnellement s'y attendre. En d'autres termes, le discours épistémique dominant peut fournir des réponses qui peuvent être considérées comme plausibles dans son cadre, et ces réponses sont adoptables en considérant qu'elles font partie de ce qui contribue à la pratique épistémique réussie. Néanmoins, cela ne prouve pas théoriquement l'exactitude de ces réponses, car aucun fait épistémique correspondant n'est présupposé dans ce contexte. À la lumière de cette analyse, la coexistence de concepts apparemment incompatibles de la sagesse peut être mieux comprise. Spécifiquement, l'opération du



discours épistémique ne concerne pas nécessairement des conflits factuels et peut donc raisonnablement accommoder des éléments en conflit.

Cela dit, une interprétation plus bienveillante de ce phénomène n'aide pas beaucoup à guider les gens vers la sagesse. Pour atteindre ce dernier objectif, un compte rendu plus concret de la sagesse est nécessaire. Cela est encore concevable, car sous les conflits apparents entre divers concepts de sagesse, il existe une conception commune de la sagesse qui nous permet de reconnaître et de comparer la sagesse sous différentes formes. En fait, la caractéristique déjà mentionnée que la sagesse est généralement considérée comme valant la peine d'être poursuivie est clairement l'un de ses aspects. De manière intéressante, dans l'épistémologie traditionnelle, c'est souvent la vérité, plutôt que la sagesse, qui est principalement considérée comme la plus précieuse. Cette tradition est typiquement étiquetée comme monisme de la valeur épistémique de la vérité, ou véritéisme. La doctrine de base du véritéisme est que la vérité est le bien épistémique fondamental. Cela implique, d'une part, qu'un concept doit maintenir une relation avec la vérité pour être considéré comme un concept « épistémique », et d'autre part, que la valeur épistémique est essentiellement évaluée en termes de vérité. Une défense robuste de ce point de vue est basée sur le postulat que la vérité, spécifiquement la vérité épistémiquement fondée, est l'objectif ultime pour les enquêteurs intellectuellement vertueux, qui sont des agents épistémiques idéalisés généralement admirés et imités par leurs pairs. L'examen plus approfondi de cet argument suggère néanmoins que tandis que les croyances vraies et adéquatement fondées sont toujours une composante essentielle de ce qu'il est idéal de poursuivre épistémiquement, la sagesse sert de concept plus fondamental car elle est capable de déterminer la portée des vérités significativement pertinentes et d'exclure celles qui ne le sont pas. Par conséquent, la sagesse pourrait jouer le rôle d'objectif épistémique ultime du processus épistémique idéalisé mieux que la vérité.

Cette interprétation raffinée de la quête épistémique ultime suggère une manière de théoriser la sagesse en se concentrant sur sa position unique au sein du processus épistémique individuel. À ce stade, il est important de noter que cette approche est envisagée sur fond de compréhension du processus de la pratique linguistique épistémique. Ainsi, ce qu'elle propose n'est pas que la sagesse est en fait l'objectif épistémique ultime. Plutôt, elle suggère simplement que l'utilisation de « sage/sagesse » dans le discours

épistémique peut être considérée comme se référant à l'objectif épistémique ultime tel que discerné par des agents épistémiques idéalisés. Cette utilisation a du sens dans la mesure où le discours épistémique contribue à notre avancement épistémique. Il est également crucial de noter que non seulement la présence d'agents épistémiques idéalisés, mais aussi celle de ceux qui portent des jugements épistémiques sur eux sont impliqués dans le contexte, car de telles évaluations sont toutes essentiellement des évaluations faites à partir de perspectives à la première personne. Inclure les émetteurs d'évaluations épistémiques peut en outre expliquer comment des propositions contradictoires sur la sagesse peuvent apparaître simultanément de manière sérieuse, car elles sont initialement des propositions faites séparément.

Pour récapituler, cette thèse développe d'abord une compréhension du processus du discours épistémique, en le considérant comme un élément clé facilitant le succès du processus épistémique, à la fois individuel et collectif. À la lumière de cette compréhension, elle développe ensuite une analyse de la sagesse sous l'angle de son rôle d'objectif ultime dans le processus épistémique. Basée sur ces deux perspectives, elle propose finalement une théorie du processus de la sagesse, en conceptualisant l'usage des termes « sage/sagesse » comme désignant principalement des résultats épistémiques considérés comme idéaux d'une perspective de la première personne. Cette théorie se révèle être un candidat sérieux pour expliquer la sagesse en raison de sa capacité à mieux traiter les considérations importantes associées à la sagesse que ses concurrents. Ces considérations englobent non seulement la manière d'aborder le phénomène de la coexistence de concepts de sagesse en conflit, mais également comment impliquer et mettre en évidence l'agence épistémique dans la théorisation, comment comprendre la force normative apportée par la sagesse en tant que concept épistémique, et comment envisager les cas atypiques où il est intuitivement escompté que les individus sages produisent des résultats pratiques mais n'y parviennent pas, parmi d'autres. Néanmoins, afin que cette théorie du processus de la sagesse soit plus utile en pratique, il est nécessaire d'ajouter un point de vue individuel plus spécifique et des attentes précises pour fournir une caractérisation concrète de la sagesse. La théorie est compatible avec différentes spécifications selon les contextes. Le cadre commun mentionné ci-dessus pour la conception de la sagesse, par exemple, peut être considéré comme une exigence de base qui doit être satisfaite dans les contextes dominants.

Cependant, une exploration plus détaillée des théories spécifiées est réservée pour des recherches futures approfondies.

## Abstract

This dissertation seeks to offer an account of wisdom, drawing particularly on contemporary Anglophone epistemological literature. Given wisdom's complexity, the aim is not to cover every aspect but rather to highlight one interesting phenomenon: the epistemic normativity of the wisdom concept. Specifically, it delves into the expectation that "wise/wisdom" will consistently pick out the same feature across different contexts, such as in the contrasting examples of a hermit's reclusive wisdom versus a social leader's worldly wisdom. This particularly prompts epistemological discussions, as the focus is on how the wisdom concept "ought to" be recognized and applied, especially in epistemic activities such as understanding and evaluating one's achievement of wisdom, which is also significantly influenced by the agent's epistemic state.

The exploration of a plausible interpretation of wisdom, considering its epistemic normativity, commences with an examination of epistemic relativism, which purportedly addresses the underlying concern of reconciling conflicting wisdom concepts. The examination reveals an implicit, second-order inclination beneath the tangible first-order epistemological debates, favoring theories that help preserve successful epistemic practice. This inclination hints at setting aside incompatible theories like epistemic relativism and viewing epistemic linguistic practice as a facilitator within our broader epistemic process. This process understanding implies both a proposal to theorize epistemic notions based on mainstream epistemic discourse, and a defense against criticisms of the proposal's reliance on past experience. In this light, the dissertation develops a process theory of wisdom based on a refined understanding of the received pursuit of truth in epistemology, positioning wisdom as the ultimate goal of epistemic process. It advocates interpreting the use of "wise/wisdom" as primarily denoting ideal epistemic outcomes from first-person perspectives. With supplementary specification, this approach effectively addresses the issue of conflicting wisdom conceptions and other prominent considerations about wisdom.

**Keywords:** Wisdom, metaepistemology, epistemic normativity, epistemic practice

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## Introduction

Wisdom is often considered the highest epistemic achievement and possesses the highest epistemic value. Thus, finding a reason to be interested in this concept is not difficult. A straightforward reason could stem from our curiosity about ourselves, given that we are labeled as wise beings (*Homo sapiens*).<sup>1</sup> In this respect, philosophers seem to have an additional motivation, not only because “philosophy” originates from “love of wisdom,” but also because philosophy is generally agreed to be a reflective discipline that is expected to examine itself. More seriously and specifically, we might consider the five reasons that Dennis Whitcomb outlines as to why epistemologists should give special consideration to the study of wisdom:

- (1) “Wisdom” seems to be a felicitous word choice for terming the highest epistemic good.
- (2) Psychological research has demonstrated the importance of wisdom as a cognitive phenomenon.
- (3) Although epistemologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have shown little interest in wisdom, many theories we inherited from ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle consider it the core epistemic achievement.
- (4) “Wisdom” is related to several issues in applied epistemology.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Trevor Curnow, *Wisdom: A History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Should we choose wisdom, instead of true belief, to be the goal of our education? For related discussions, see, e.g. Robert J. Sternberg, "Why Schools Should Teach for Wisdom: The Balance Theory of Wisdom in Educational Settings," *Educational Psychologist* 36, no. 4 (2001), [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3604\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3604_2). and Ward E. Jones, "Wisdom as an Aim of Higher Education," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 49 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-014-9443-z>.

(5) Recent discussions on epistemic value have also brought wisdom into the scope.<sup>1</sup>

Following the appeal of these motivations, the basic objective of this dissertation is to provide an account of wisdom from an epistemological perspective, potentially holding its own theoretical advantage over contemporary literature on this topic. That said, an interesting phenomenon highlighted by Whitcomb's third point is worth noting: Despite these compelling reasons for our fascination with wisdom, its study has surprisingly little representation in recent research. As Nicholas D. Smith observes, "[w]isdom is little evident as a subject of contemporary philosophical discussion."<sup>2</sup> There has been a significant decline of interest in the theoretical pursuit of wisdom ever since Aristotle. Although we can find John Kekes,<sup>3</sup> Linda T. Zagzebski,<sup>4</sup> Sharon Ryan,<sup>5</sup> Stephen R. Grimm,<sup>6</sup> Cheng-hung Tsai,<sup>7</sup> among others drawing people's attention to wisdom again, the

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Whitcomb, "Wisdom," in *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Sven Berneker and Duncan Pritchard (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 95-96. Note: Unless otherwise specified, the numbering of lists in this dissertation is not intended for cross-referencing across third-level subsections (e.g., 1.1.1).

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas D. Smith, "Wisdom," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 752.

<sup>3</sup> John Kekes, "Wisdom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1983); *Wisdom: A Humanistic Conception* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Sharon Ryan, "Wisdom," in *Knowledge, Teaching and Wisdom*, ed. Keith Lehrer et al. (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 1996); "What Is Wisdom?," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 93, no. 2 (1999), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4320907>; "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," *Acta Analytica* 27, no. 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-012-0160-6>; "Wisdom," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2020 Edition, 2014). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/wisdom/>.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen R. Grimm, "Wisdom," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 93, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-397045-9.00054-9>; "Wisdom in Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, ed. William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Cheng-hung Tsai, "Phronesis and Techne: The Skill Model of Wisdom Defended," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 98, no. 2 (2020); "Practical Wisdom, Well - Being, and Success," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 104, no. 3 (2022); *Wisdom: A Skill Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). It should be noted that Tsai only focuses on practical wisdom, whereas the discussion in this dissertation will concern a broader concept. We will delve into their distinction in Chapter 1.



efforts devoted to relevant research are not high, to say the least, and are significantly lower than those for other significant epistemic concepts like knowledge or understanding when the focus is narrowed to epistemology. Compared to contemporary philosophical writing on this subject, perhaps surprisingly, more empirical research is found to be centered around “wisdom” in current literature of psychology, pedagogy, and gerontology, etc. These empirical works no doubt provide plentiful resources for us to deepen our understanding of wisdom, and they also give a new reason for epistemologists to pay heed to this concept: Given that empirical researchers often base their studies on specific definitions of wisdom, epistemology, with its traditional role to play in concept analysis, is well-positioned to make a significant contribution. However, what is to be anticipated in such contribution?

Chapter 1 begins with an overview of contemporary empirical studies on wisdom. This exploration provides a more comprehensive backdrop of current literature on the topic and uncovers a potential concern about accommodating diverse perspectives of wisdom in a plausible theoretical framework. The latter issue suggests the necessity for more in-depth research into the epistemically normative dimension of wisdom, which can effectively harmonize differing, and sometimes conflicting, viewpoints. This naturally leads to an interest in philosophical, specifically epistemological analysis, which is traditionally deemed pertinent in this regard. The chapter then proceeds with a critical examination of prevalent insights into wisdom from contemporary Anglophone epistemology. It presents and refines various plausible criteria for being wise, which greatly inform our understanding of the concept as well as eventual theoretical proposal about wisdom. Nevertheless, this exploration also indicates that simply introducing philosophical discussions about wisdom does not automatically resolve the normative issue, as varied expectations of wisdom might still lead to conflicts even when they are considered epistemologically. This observation points to the importance of addressing the normative concern before proposing a more developed epistemological interpretation of wisdom.

To address the issue about the unified understanding of wisdom, Chapter 2 explores the potential of introducing a normative concept of wisdom based on relativism, which purports to settle worrisome clashing viewpoints through relativization. While an examination of prevalent arguments for relativism, specifically the more relevant epistemic

variety, is provided, the results are neither clearly for nor against its plausibility. However, the analysis reveals an implicit line of thought about the efforts to theoretically account for our epistemic linguistic practices, manifesting in the contrast between mainstream epistemology and less conventional epistemic relativism, each drawing on aspects of our epistemic discourse. In this light, Chapter 3 further reveals the second-order, namely, metaepistemological dimension underlying more tangible epistemological discussions, including those concerning relativism. Such metaepistemological considerations are associated with tacit views on the nature of epistemological talks. It is proposed that they can be interpreted as theoretical rationalizations of the actual practices of our epistemic language, which constitute part of our larger-scale epistemic process. Given the fruitful outcomes of human epistemic endeavors, there arises a compelling reason to support metaepistemological positions that align with and sustain our successful epistemic discourse, while simultaneously rejecting stances like epistemic relativism, which appear incompatible with these practices.

The conclusion of Chapter 3 highlights two points: First, it suggests setting aside relativism in epistemology, particularly the relativistic understanding of wisdom. This allows for choosing definitive stances amidst potentially conflicting views of wisdom. Second, it encourages a critical examination of prevailing ideas within the epistemic discourse to answer contentious questions. These insights lay the foundation for responding to the normative issue in Chapter 4, where a proposal about wisdom is developed based on the mainstream epistemological tradition that prioritizes the value of truth. In light of it, wisdom is conceptualized as integrating the pursuit of truth to serve as the ultimate goal of the broader epistemic process. The chapter follows with a solution that builds upon the emphasized role of epistemic practice to address the potential concern about justifying this concept's normative appeal based solely on past experience.

Chapter 4's discussion introduces the concept of wisdom as the ultimate pursuit in epistemology, with normative force stemming from practical success. Chapter 5 then applies this concept to the initial considerations about wisdom presented in the first chapter. This application aims to examine its potential in addressing the plausible expectations of wisdom and the underlying concerns, especially the challenge of encompassing diverse views of wisdom. As the exploration unfolds, the proposed concept of wisdom is further

developed into a theory of wisdom grounded in the process understanding of epistemic linguistic practice. It interprets the use of “wisdom” as primarily picking out ideal epistemic outcomes from first personal perspectives, which facilitates the operation of epistemic discourse. This approach provides a way to reconcile various plausible requirements for wise individuals from different viewpoints, and also proves capable of handling other important issues as well as potential objections mentioned in this dissertation.

The key benefit of this process theory of wisdom lies in its ability to offer a clearer view of how the normative appeal of requirements for the wise is established. While it effectively resolves matters related to potential conflicts among various interpretations of wisdom, it also highlights the necessity of being supplemented by further elaboration, particularly in establishing specific perspectives to determine the perspectival standards of wisdom. This points to the need for additional research aimed at providing more concrete, context-specific guidance, which merits further exploration in extended studies.

## Chapter 1: A Theoretical Framework for the Concept of Wisdom

**Chapter Abstract:** Drawing on contemporary literature from both empirical research and philosophical inquiry, this chapter presents common expectations for the wise. From an epistemological perspective, these expectations are considered within a framework modeled after the epistemic process, highlighting wise individuals' epistemic characteristics, target objects, and practices. They constitute reasonable requirements for the wise that should be taken into account, and thus provide a foundation for developing a plausible theory of wisdom. However, the discussion also reveals underlying concerns among the diverse expectations associated with wisdom, particularly those leading to implausible conflicts. To respond, the introduction of a normative generic concept of wisdom is proposed. This concept will be further explored in the following chapters, with a particular emphasis on investigating a specific question about the truth condition for wisdom theories, which serves as an exemplary case among various issues that the normative generic concept is expected to address.

Wisdom has long been regarded as a significant concept. Sincerely praising someone as wise goes beyond a standard compliment, reflecting a profound appreciation of her epistemic or even overall state. While history had witnessed a long time of limited contributions to the study of wisdom itself, such interests have recently been reignited.<sup>1</sup> The objective of this dissertation is to draw on recent studies in this field and propose a potentially more plausible theory of wisdom, specifically from an epistemological perspective. To start with, an overview of key findings in current research will be provided as the basis for our further discussion. Given the greater volume of contemporary empirical studies on this topic compared to philosophical inquiries, this opening chapter will embark with a review of some representative empirical research, especially psychological discussions of wisdom. This analysis will establish a contrasting context, against which we can clarify the distinct contributions that philosophers may bring to wisdom's theorization.

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<sup>1</sup> For details, see introduction.

The subsequent section will then turn to prevailing philosophical accounts of wisdom and offer an examination of current philosophical insights, drawing specifically from contemporary Anglophone epistemological tradition. The exploration in these two sections will illustrate a preliminary framework encompassing prevalent expectations for the wise,<sup>1</sup> on the basis of which we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of wisdom. However, the discussion of this framework will also reveal a deeper, more intricate issue about the relationship among the diverse anticipations for wise individuals. The third section will delve into shedding light on this underlying concern, which paves the way for the discussions aiming to address it in the forthcoming chapters for a refined approach to conceptualizing wisdom.

### 1. Gaps between Perspectives and Epistemic Normativity of Wisdom

There are currently multiple theories and means of evaluation used by scientists in their study of wisdom, more numerous than philosophers' proposals. These empirical studies significantly contribute to our understanding of wisdom, providing a valuable background for us to consider when theorizing wisdom in a philosophical, or more precisely, epistemological context. This, of course, does not imply a need to approach the topic more empirically. After all, philosophers may find no necessity or interest in entering an already crowded arena dominated by non-philosophical norms. However, it is beneficial to see how philosophy can contribute to and complement the ongoing debates surrounding wisdom in its unique way in contrast to the scientific offerings, which will be the task of this initiating section.

Contemporary empirical research on wisdom is often found in the field of psychology. For example, Paul B. Baltes and Ursula M. Staudinger establish the Berlin

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<sup>1</sup> At this point, both "expectation(s) of" and "expectation(s) for" can be used, and their distinction is subtle. However, considering that this dissertation is more inclined to focus on the perspectives of those setting these expectations (which will be clearer in subsequent chapters), the term "expectation(s) for" will hereafter be used consistently for clarity.

Wisdom Paradigm;<sup>1</sup> they maintain that wisdom primarily involves expert knowledge and judgement regarding life's challenges. Monika Ardelt argues that there are three aspects of wisdom, namely cognitive, reflective, and emotional aspects, and proposes her Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale.<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Sternberg suggests a balance theory of wisdom, based on his study of tacit knowledge, which views wisdom as a kind of tacit knowledge that balances different interests with the aim of public good.<sup>3</sup> Igor Grossmann leads a team that focuses on the relationship between wisdom and aging, and how wisdom facilitates rational thinking in social conflicts.<sup>4</sup> Scott C. Brown and Jeffrey A. Greene stress the role of wisdom as a product of comprehensive learning; using their Wisdom Development Scale, they assess various factors that may enhance individuals' wisdom level.<sup>5</sup> And the list goes on, including the Foundational Value Scale,<sup>6</sup> the San Diego Wisdom Scale,<sup>7</sup> etc.

These studies are varied, many of which start by proposing their understanding of wisdom, some focusing more on the relation between wisdom and other elements, and some focusing more on the development of wisdom, among other theoretical interests. Nevertheless, scientific discussions of wisdom share a general feature of being empirically

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<sup>1</sup> Paul B. Baltes and Ursula M. Staudinger, "Wisdom: A Metaheuristic (Pragmatic) to Orchestrate Mind and Virtue toward Excellence," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.122>.

<sup>2</sup> Monika Ardelt, "Empirical Assessment of a Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale," *Research on Aging* 25, no. 3 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027503251764>.

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Sternberg, "A Balance Theory of Wisdom," *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 4 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.4.347>; "What Is Wisdom and How Can We Develop It?," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 591 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203260097>.

<sup>4</sup> Igor Grossmann et al., "Reasoning about Social Conflicts Improves into Old Age," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107, no. 16 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1001715107>.

<sup>5</sup> Scott C. Brown and Jeffrey A. Greene, "The Wisdom Development Scale: Translating the Conceptual to the Concrete," *Journal of College Student Development* 47, no. 1 (2006); Jeffrey A. Greene and Scott C. Brown, "The Wisdom Development Scale: Further Validity Investigations," *Aging And Human Development* 68, no. 4 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.2190/AG.68.4.b>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.2190/AG.68.4.b>.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard A. Jason et al., "The Measurement of Wisdom: A Preliminary Effort," *Journal of Community Psychology* 29, no. 5 (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.1037>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael L. Thomas et al., "A New Scale for Assessing Wisdom Based on Common Domains and a Neurobiological Model: The San Diego Wisdom Scale (SD-WISE)," *Journal of Psychiatric Research* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2017.09.005>.

based, highlighting the importance of experiments and observation. This enables their approach to provide concrete insights based on testable resources, which brings additional assurance to the credibility of their findings. However, this approach also frequently raises concerns regarding whether the underpinning inductive reasoning is based on sufficiently reliable and inclusive databases and is robust enough against potential counterexamples. Such concerns might become more worrying when the literature reveals contrasting approaches being employed simultaneously. For example, Vivian P. Clayton and James Birren's research captures the characteristics of wisdom as perceived by ordinary people,<sup>1</sup> whereas proponents of the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm propose a more prescriptive set of criteria, evaluating individuals based on standards of wisdom predefined by the researchers.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, while many of these studies initiate their inquiry by gathering external perspectives on the wise, Jeffrey D. Webster synthesizes various dimensions of wisdom into a self-assessed wisdom scale to measure the wisdom level of the participants in his research.<sup>3</sup> Although the findings garnered from these diverse approaches are undoubtedly enlightening, the extent to which they collectively offer a comprehensive understanding of the concept of wisdom remains a subject of debate.

The concern initially arises from the commonly accepted understanding that achieving the state of wisdom is extremely difficult, if not nearly impossible. Given the extreme difficulty in finding a truly wise individual without contention, an ideal test subject is practically unattainable (even if the physical existence of such a person is available, it is unclear how an all-aspect study can be conducted, especially ethically). Thus, it is understandable that empirical researchers turn to alternative approaches, approaching the topic with methods that include identifying plausible features of wisdom and subsequently

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<sup>1</sup> V. P. Clayton and J. Birren, "The Development of Wisdom across The Life Span: A Reexamination of an Ancient Topic," in *Life-span Development and Behavior*, ed. P. B. Baltes and O. G. Brim, Jr. (New York and London: Psychology Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Baltes and Staudinger, "Wisdom.,"; Judith Glück and Paul B. Baltes, "Using the Concept of Wisdom to Enhance the Expression of Wisdom Knowledge: Not the Philosopher's Dream but Differential Effects of Developmental Preparedness," *Psychology and Aging* 21, no. 4 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1037/0882-7974.21.4.679>.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Dean Webster, "An Exploratory Analysis of a Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale," *Journal of Adult Development* 10, no. 1 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020782619051>; "Measuring the Character Strength of Wisdom," *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 65, no. 2 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.2190/AG.65.2.d>.

conducting studies on individuals that meet such criteria, through studies on elements related to the common conception of wisdom, or through studies on subjects indirectly related to the concept of interest. Nevertheless, when it comes to a topic like wisdom, if a direct target for research is unavailable, reliance on personal evaluation seems to be inevitable — who can judge who is wise other than those who judge? The examples, closely related to wisdom or its associated notions, are selected based on personal evaluation, and non-wise subjects are also involved in the research by providing their personal views on wisdom. As a result, at the end of the day, it all boils down to personal assessment of wisdom, which seemingly immediately leads to two potential worries: For one, a collection of subjective evaluation will be questioned for its objective value, which is typically expected in empirical studies (by contrast, a philosophical account of wisdom might be found satisfactory enough as long as it is insightful). For another, personal appraisal relies on personal understanding of wisdom, which raises doubts about its validity, as wisdom is both difficult and vague to grasp, rendering common opinions about it less promising in reliability.

The second potential worry can go even further. That is, even if we can ensure that people involved in research are all reliable subjects and that they provide credible thoughts on the topic of wisdom, people could still have wildly diverse opinions about what counts as wisdom. In fact, except for perhaps only few well-recognized wise figures (Solomon, Athena, Confucius, Socrates... some of them are obviously not real persons, some of them are now conceived with much association with later imagination, and even these names are arguable), people can have in mind drastically different lists of names for candidates for the wise. It is probably the case that the difficulty in grasping what wisdom is partly leads to the disagreements (we will see a challenge to psychological studies of wisdom arising from such difficulty in the next subsection). But in any case, the further difficulty is that there is a multitude of diverse and potentially conflicting views concerning what wisdom is and what wise individuals should be like.

Considering these potential concerns, empirical researchers seem to need to explain further why their findings are sufficiently robust and worth considering. After all, they seem to apply different, though often overlapping but still potentially conflicting, criteria to distinct sources of data to produce their outcomes. While their evaluative processes are



all conducted under explicitly proposed standards that are plausible to a certain extent (since they are accepted for publication), it is unclear how ultimately these standards can yield satisfactorily objective and credible results. It is particularly unsettling when one realizes that since wisdom consists in a series of good judgements, without the support from an extensive project that monitors and assesses a sufficient number of participants' behaviors throughout their whole life, the limited coverage of wisdom-related cases is likely to result in blind spots. Furthermore, one might worry that even if all these theories and experiments make sense within their own aspect, none of them can lead us to a coherent understanding of wisdom, as they might turn out to be mutually incompatible at certain point.

These difficulties appear to be good starting points for critically viewing empirical studies. One might argue that these issues are unavoidable because concerns for practical feasibility are sometimes more important than thoroughness when designing experiments, and the empirical approach is thus inherently flawed. However, they do not necessarily constitute knock-down counterarguments. The reason is that empirical approaches can be structured with a variety of methods, which can also be expected to aid in improving their theories' objectivity, credibility, and coherence gradually. This phenomenon can be more sympathetically interpreted through Richard Garrett's distinction: Garrett contends that there are two ways to define wisdom, one producing a provisional/heuristic definition of wisdom, and the other leading to a final definition of wisdom. A provisional or heuristic definition of wisdom is proposed at the beginning of the research and provides what is needed for the research to proceed. The goal of this process is to identify what people seek in their pursuit of "wisdom." A final definition of wisdom, on the other hand, is established at the end of the study, by concluding what kind of states make the wise people as such.<sup>1</sup> So, from the former point of view, it is perfectly understandable that, at least so far, the empirical research is a work in progress, and it does not imply that empirical research can never reach a final definition of wisdom. Indeed, it is conceivable how, by detailed discussions of each questionable point present in the literature, frequent exchanges of thoughts within the scientific community, careful selection and refinement of personal

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Garrett, "Three Definitions of Wisdom," in *Knowledge, Teaching And Wisdom*, ed. Keith Lehrer et al. (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 1996), pp. 226-27.

evaluation, introducing mechanisms to reduce subjectivity and enhance reliability, empirical approaches can significantly enhance their findings' value for consideration comprehensively. In fact, many scientists are already aware of the conflicts and oversimplifications in current wisdom studies. They have started to develop criticisms of their rival theories<sup>1</sup> and reflect on cross-age, cross-gender,<sup>2</sup> as well as cross-cultural comparisons.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, there is not only evidence showing that empirical researchers are sharing some common ground,<sup>4</sup> especially regarding the topic that they are delving into — that is, wisdom limited to a concept concerning “knowledge of how to live the best life,”<sup>5</sup> but also mechanisms like the Delphi Method that might finally lead to their consensus.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on these, the prospect of reaching objective, convincing, and coherent scientific, especially psychological theories of wisdom is still optimistic. Philosophers, in

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Monika Ardel, "Wisdom as Expert Knowledge System: A Critical Review of a Contemporary Operationalization of an Ancient Concept," *Human Development* 47, no. 5 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1159/000079154>; P. Baltes and U. Kunzmann, "The Two Faces of Wisdom: Wisdom as a General Theory of Knowledge and Judgement about Excellence in Mind and Virtue vs. Wisdom as Everyday Realization in People and Products," *Human Development* 47, no. 5 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1159/000079156>; Monika Ardel, "The Measurement of Wisdom: A Commentary on Taylor, Bates, and Webster's Comparison of the SAWS and 3D-WS," (2011). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0361073X.2011.554509>.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Nancy W. Denney, James R. Dew, and Shenan L. Kroupa, "Perceptions of Wisdom: What Is It and Who Has It?," *Journal of Adult Development* 2, no. 2 (1995), <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02261740>; Monika Ardel, "How Similar are Wise Men and Women? A Comparison Across Two Age Cohorts," *Research in Human Development* 6, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427600902779354>; Judith Glück, Irene Strasser, and Susan Bluck, "Gender Differences in Implicit Theories of Wisdom," *Research in Human Development* 6, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427600902779370>; Michael R. Levenson, "Gender and Wisdom: The Roles of Compassion and Moral Development," *Research in Human Development* 6, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427600902782127>.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Masami Takahashi and Prashant Bordia, "The Concept of Wisdom: A Cross-cultural Comparison," *International Journal of Psychology* 35, no. 1 (2000); Nic M. Weststrate, Michel Ferrari, and Monika Ardel, "The Many Faces of Wisdom: An Investigation of Cultural-Historical Wisdom Exemplars Reveals Practical, Philosophical, and Benevolent Prototypes," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 42, no. 5 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216638075>; Grimm, "Wisdom in Theology."

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Ursula M. Staudinger and Judith Glück, "Psychological Wisdom Research: Commonalities and Differences in a Growing Field," *Annual Review of Psychology* 62 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.121208.131659>; Katherine J. Bangen, Thomas W. Meeks, and Dilip V. Jeste, "Defining and Assessing Wisdom: A Review of the Literature," *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 21, no. 12 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2012.11.020>.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Ferrari and Juensung Kim, "Educating for Wisdom," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg and Judith Glück (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 347.

<sup>6</sup> Dilip V. Jeste et al., "Expert Consensus on Characteristics of Wisdom: A Delphi Method Study," *Gerontologist* 50, no. 5 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnq022>.

the meanwhile, seem capable of facilitating the process by offering insights regarding the reflection on and reorganization of experimental settings and findings, as well as pointing out currently missing aspects and worthy directions for further exploration.

This preliminary examination of the contributions from empirical research is clearly tentative, but it appears unnecessary to delve deeper into the debates over the persuasiveness of these empirical outcomes, since such debates offer little to the philosophical studies of wisdom. More intriguing for our dissertation are the underlying issues that, despite empirical theories being compelling by their own standards, may not be adequately addressed. One such issue, noticeable at this juncture, concerns accommodating conflicting views. A challenge related to encompassing might initially seem to be about capturing all conceivable features of wisdom, a task seemingly resolvable over time. However, even if we can include all credible facets of wisdom in a sufficiently objective list for consideration, and thereby formulate coherent theories, this does not prevent conceptions of wisdom from differing. This phenomenon does not obviously constitute a problem for empirical studies of wisdom, given a limited setting of scope, which is a common practice in designing feasible experiments. Yet, should theorists become more ambitious, aiming for an ideal scenario where every conceivable conception of wisdom is documented, they might believe they are ready to reveal the nature of wisdom and find this issue pressing. In fact, the pressure has already manifested itself in the existing gaps between perspectives discussed earlier.

First, between experts' views and those of laypeople, there lies a subtle distinction in perspectives on wisdom. This subtle gap becomes prominent when theories of wisdom are divided into two kinds, in line with Sternberg's distinction between explicit theories and implicit theories: The former is constructed by experts, while the latter reflects laypeople's understanding of wisdom's features.<sup>1</sup> It is natural to question whether these two kinds of theories, being distinguished from each other, could be synthesized as research progresses. If the discussion is limited to theorists' mutual disagreements regarding theories already acknowledged as at least prototype theories in the academic scope, which makes negotiation and settlement promising based on certain shared rational standards,

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<sup>1</sup> Sternberg, "Balance Theory of Wisdom," pp. 348-51.

then it falls under the issue previously deemed less concerning. What goes beyond the previous issue, however, is the potential ambition that theorists have in re-presenting what ordinary people have in mind about wisdom. What is worrying is that if experts and laypeople hold divergent views from the outset, then no consensus at the end is assured, and neither can claim a comprehensive view of wisdom. Specifically, while theorists' rationalization of their theories is common and acceptable in developing more intelligible and intellectually advanced theories, there is no compelling reason for laypeople to accept being rationalized more than their natural inclinations. Scientists may propose theories that transcend subjectivity, are meticulously refined, and systematically consistent, accommodating various opinions about wisdom, but it is difficult to see why laypeople should abandon their simpler views just because the rationalized proposal is more encompassing. This does not imply that ordinary people cannot refine their understanding of wisdom or learn from a broader synthesis of different views. What is essential here is that given that empirical results ultimately stem from personal evaluations, there is no clear source from which empirical researchers can derive authority to require other people to adopt these rationalized proposals. Consequently, even if empirical findings can be sorted out into a comprehensive theory, incorporating all conceivable aspects of wisdom in a sensible manner, it remains incomplete as some people might reject such assimilation, and they have no obligation to conform. This rejection is even more understandable when we recognize that there are no evident epistemic errors or faults in these individuals' conceptions of wisdom (for more on this, see Section 3).

Another significant gap emerges from the possibility of conducting self-assessment of wisdom — the gap between the first-person perspective and the third-person perspective. While this approach to evaluating one's wisdom is less intuitive, as we tend to question people's ability to remain humble, self-acknowledge does constitute a very important aspect of our expectation for the wise. Indeed, if someone widely regarded as wise lacks confidence in their own wisdom, this doubt significantly undermines their perceived level of wisdom in further evaluations (more on this in Sub-subsection 2.3.1). However, if the self-appreciation aspect is taken into account, there will then be an issue regarding the matching between the first- and third- person perspectives. Consider Person A, who attributes her happy life to her own efforts. From her first-person perspective, she can solve

every problem with her wisdom. Under some circumstances, other people may ask for her help in dealing with certain issues. And after applying what is learned from her to their own situations, these people would agree that she is offering wise solutions to their problems. Nevertheless, from a third-person perspective, she might be using methods that are not typically praised, or even despised, by most people. We can also imagine a person *B*, who is admired by almost everyone who knows her. From the third-person perspective, she helps people solve their difficulties and leads the community towards harmony. At the same time, she can also maintain a healthy work-life balance. Yet, when informed of other people's perception of her wisdom, *B* is very surprised, as she has never considered herself worthy of such praise. Sincerely, *B* states that she has never recognized her own wisdom, believing she is simply doing her best to solve each problem she encounters. What is even more unexpected to you is that *B* confesses her tiredness as life seems to be too busy for her to enjoy anything. Doubting her sincerity, you secretly use a polygraph to determine if her humility is genuine. And it turns out that she is telling the truth.

These two examples should be good enough to show that a person's own judgment of her wisdom can be drastically different from the view of the public. Indeed, some psychologists have already noticed this gap between these two kinds of judgment. For example, Uwe Redzanowski and Judith Glück have found in their research that one's own evaluation of their wisdom has zero, or even negative relevance with the rating from their peers.<sup>1</sup> Regarding this issue, we may consider Staudinger's suggestion that, in fact, there exist two kinds of wisdom concepts: personal wisdom and general wisdom.<sup>2</sup> He contends that personal wisdom is a personal perspective concept, whereas general wisdom is a public perspective concept.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, this distinction might be a dangerous direction of

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<sup>1</sup> Uwe Redzanowski and Judith Glück, "Who Knows Who Is Wise? Self and Peer Ratings of Wisdom," *Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 68, no. 3 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbs079>.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that while Staudinger's distinction will be rejected, the term "general wisdom" is still used elsewhere in this dissertation to denote the concept of wisdom about general life, in contrast to wisdom in specific fields. This choice of terminology is not related to Staudinger's framework. However, considering that this is an intuitive word choice, it is not deliberately avoided either.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula M. Staudinger, "The Need to Distinguish Personal from General Wisdom: A Short History and Empirical Evidence," in *The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom: From Contemplative Traditions to Neuroscience*, ed. Michel Ferrari and Nic M. Weststrate (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013).

research, because we do presume that there is, at least, some agreement between evaluation from these two perspectives. As is shown in the cases above, we can easily deny subject *A* as a truly wise person, for being admirable is usually considered as a key characteristic of wise people, and *A*'s ego-centric understanding of wisdom is blatantly contrary to it. We also feel reluctant to accept subject *B* as a wise person if she could never figure out why people think that she is wise, since it is difficult to imagine a person who is wise but without any idea of her own epistemic situation. Of course, *B* is not required to be conscious of her wisdom all the time, but she should be ready to understand why people would relate this virtue to her, otherwise she is just too dumb to be praised so highly. Therefore, integrating both perspectives is essential for a comprehensive assessment of wisdom, but the method of unification remains an open question. For empirical researchers, this presents once again the challenge of encouraging individuals to transcend their respective perspectives: merely reporting each side's inclination does not automatically overcome the obstacle, but a rational synthesis of two sides' viewpoints has nothing in support to require either side to adhere to.

At first glance, this appears to be a general issue regarding the challenge of identifying an account of wisdom that transcends limited viewpoints and we can all agree upon. This becomes clearer when applying the popular concern about the universal acceptance of intuitions common in the western world to wisdom studies.<sup>1</sup> Yet, on a deeper level, it seems to have been assumed that the gaps between various perspectives necessitate invoking a principle or concept that compels a consensus on wisdom judgments instead of sticking to their own views and assessment of wisdom.<sup>2</sup> This assumption harbors two implicit presuppositions: First, the need for people to seek harmonization of their respective opinions; and second, there exists a means or method to be invoked, with the help of which people can transcend their personal perspectives and adjust their understandings and

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Tiberius and Jason Swartwood, "Wisdom Revisited: A Case Study in Normative Theorizing," *Philosophical Explorations* 14, no. 3 (2011): p. 290, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2011.594961>.

<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation, the term "should" is used in a general sense to encompass various meanings, including but not limited to "ought to," "be supposed to," and "have good reasons to," because the issues concerning the normative force of epistemic principles (e.g., epistemic duties) are complex and require specialized treatment beyond the scope of this dissertation.

evaluation of wisdom to achieve agreement. In philosophy, these kinds of considerations are often labeled as normative, indicating that they are about what “ought to” be done — what is right, what is wrong, what is valuable and what is not. Specifically, in this context, the primary concern is a form of epistemic normativity: epistemic agents “should” understand the concept of wisdom as such-and-such despite what they originally hold and make evaluation accordingly. In this light, the potential challenge that empirical research might face stems from a lack of account in this respect, such as a lack of explaining why empirical results can also be normative despite being based on subjective opinions, a failure to add in an explicit source to introduce normative requirements for people to adhere to, or a lack of response to the potential worry regarding the normative dimension of the wisdom concept. In essence, the potential issue is about the absence or lack of hints on taking into account the wisdom concept’s normative implications. Some might contend that the notion of wisdom as normative is illusory and not worth discussing. Yet, it does appear to be a widely held intuition. For instance, wisdom is commonly perceived as something that “should” be superior to knowledge and worth pursuing, despite our limited understanding of it. Moreover, the term “wisdom” can be used in radically contrasting contexts, e.g., praising a hermit who stays away from engaging in worldly concerns vs. praising a social activist who engages in shaping the world, while seemingly maintaining the same meaning. This is related to the expectation for wisdom judgments to be harmonized that we might find intuitively appealing, which is also suggesting that interpretations and judgments of wisdom from different perspective should share certain sameness. Such phenomena seem to suggest that the common view warrants at least some consideration, even if it is a mere denial in the passing.

While empirical studies may have potential response and future development in this regard, philosophical, specifically epistemological as it is epistemic normativity that is directly concerned here, may offer something uniquely valuable on this issue. One immediate reason is that philosophical approaches are generally closer associated with addressing normative concerns, which are essentially related to abstract values that empirical research often finds difficult to reveal or to preserve. It is for this reason that this dissertation finds the exploration of wisdom from an epistemological perspective particularly important. That said, this does not suggest that by turning to epistemology, a

solution to the issue can be automatically generated. Let us now first explore prevalent epistemological views of wisdom in contemporary analytic literature. This will allow us to understand how epistemologists interpret and approach wisdom. Following this, we can evaluate whether their perspectives contribute to reconciling conflicting viewpoints on the subject and assist in addressing the issue from a different angle.

## 2. Requirements in Contemporary Philosophical Literature about Wisdom

Epistemologists aim to shed light on concepts crucial for understanding our cognitive processes. In contemporary analytic literature, this task is typically achieved by proposing definitions, or more specifically, necessary and sufficient conditions for epistemic concepts. However, these projects often fail to yield sufficiently compelling results that can be relied upon without further adjustments or qualifications. Specifically, as Lisa M. Osbeck and Daniel N. Robinson note, illustrating a complex notion like wisdom is much easier than defining it.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in this section, we will review mainstream considerations in contemporary analytic epistemology more generally, categorizing various expectations for the wise into different groups. This exploration will be broad, encompassing not only stringent definitions and structured theories but also less precise accounts as well as insights. It will also be critical, as we will engage in preliminary discussions about the necessity of retaining or refining elements mentioned by other philosophers. The goal of this examination is to develop a framework that offers plausible interpretations of the concept of wisdom. This framework will illuminate key aspects of the widely accepted understanding of wisdom, which likely carries certain normative weight due to its plausibility. Although it remains to be seen whether this normative influence is strong enough to address related concerns, this framework will provide a valuable starting point for further exploration into the nuances of wisdom.

Nevertheless, before we begin, it would be beneficial to preliminarily determine how the structure of this framework can facilitate our discussion. Various methods exist

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa M. Osbeck and N. Daniel Robinson, "Philosophical Theories of Wisdom," in *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg and Jennifer Jordan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 63.



for categorizing the diverse expectations associated with wisdom. One intuitive method is to classify relevant considerations based on the subject field of the “wisdom” they pertain to, such as general wisdom, theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom, etc. However, given the emphasis on harmonizing various perspectives, these subject distinctions might not be ideal as they create further divisions between perspectives that we hope to transcend. As Sharon Ryan observes, wisdom is often conceived as a unified concept, on the basis of which philosophers propose comprehensive theories of wisdom. By contrast, some philosophers divide wisdom into two types — practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom — and focus on developing theories based on this dichotomy. Since a person possessing only one type of wisdom cannot be genuinely acknowledged as truly wise, Sharon Ryan believes that the first way of theorization is more reasonable.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, while there is room for more detailed theories on specific types of wisdom, it seems sensible to directly explore the theorization of wisdom as a broad concept if it remains interesting and applicable without qualifications.

In this light, Sharon Ryan suggests considering wisdom theories by positioning them among three categories:

Many theories of wisdom can be put into at least one of at least three categories. One category focuses on epistemic humility, or having an accurate sense of one’s epistemic limits, being scrupulous when forming beliefs, and possessing a healthy dose of skepticism. A second main category focuses on possessing extensive knowledge or understanding. A third category focuses on the ability to apply one’s knowledge and successfully navigate through life’s practical and moral challenges.<sup>2</sup>

Sharon Ryan essentially proposes that there are three kinds of wisdom theories, focusing respectively on epistemic subjects’ characteristics, their information possession, and their capability to apply this information in practice. This classification is illuminating, but it might be further interpreted or developed, as these three categories naturally form a sequential ladder in the general inquiry process: we employ epistemic characteristics to be better informed, and then apply the information thus gained in practice. From this aspect, the three categories can be viewed as three stages of which our broader epistemic process

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

consists of.<sup>1</sup> This approach enables us to develop a sensible framework for considering the concept of wisdom from an epistemological perspective. It does so by incorporating the various expectations for wisdom outlined by epistemologists into a framework modeled on different phases of inquiry. Since wisdom is commonly understood as a complex, encompassing, and unifying concept, we can expect to uncover and discuss significant requirements for the wise at each detailed stage of our epistemic process.

## 2.1 Wisdom as Epistemic Characteristic

Sharon Ryan's first category focuses on the characteristics of wise people, particularly their epistemic humility. To illustrate why this is crucial to wisdom, she cites the famous story of Socrates from the *Apology*: Chaerephon, a friend of Socrates, asks the oracle in Delphi whether there is anyone wiser than Socrates. The oracle responds that there is no one. Socrates is confused, as he does not think that he owns any wisdom. Therefore, he sets out to find wise individuals, attempting to prove the oracle wrong. The plan is to visit people who enjoy the fame of wisdom, talk with them, and see if they are genuinely wise. His first visit is to a politician and other men reputed to be wise. To his disappointment, however, these people with great reputation do not know anything truly valuable but believe in their possession of wisdom. While Socrates himself has no greater knowledge than they, he is at least aware of his own ignorance. Considering this, Socrates accepts that he is wiser than them. Then, Socrates visits some poets and writers who are known for composing marvelous verse. Nevertheless, Socrates discovers that they rely on talent and inspiration to create poems, without comprehending the true meaning of their

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, the terms "inquiry" and "epistemic process" are often used interchangeably, particularly when discussing cognitive activities with a specific epistemic goal. Both terms are used in a general sense, referring to a sequence of actions aimed at information gathering. This might lead to some potential worries such as whether "inquiry" and "epistemic process" should be more precisely distinguished (since, typically, "inquiry" relates more to the practical actions of seeking information, whereas "epistemic process" concerns itself more with the theoretical reflection of these actions). These are serious questions that warrant careful consideration; nevertheless, a full exploration of them is beyond the limited scope and space of this dissertation. For our current purposes, both terms are employed in a manner that allows for an integrated view of the practical and theoretical dimensions of epistemic activities. However, I will delve into some of these complexities, specifically those concerning the relationship between overtly observable and more covert epistemic actions in §1.2.2 of Chapter 5. There, I hope to provide some further, albeit still preliminary, discussion of why I find these terms to be interchangeable.

words. What is even worse is that their success in poetry leads them to falsely believe they understand fields in which they lack knowledge. Being disappointed again, Socrates next approaches the craftsmen. Unfortunately, again, while they do have mastery of techniques, because of their success in their own business, these craftsmen believe they know things in other respects. As a result, Socrates concludes that he does possess a form of wisdom, compared to those deemed wise by many. His wisdom is not knowing more than others but knowing more about his own ignorance.<sup>1</sup> In our current context, the crux of this well-known story is that even if wisdom is considered in epistemology, wisdom is not achieved through random epistemic processes. To be wise, one must first possess certain epistemic characteristics. Without these, seemingly similar epistemic processes will not yield the same outcome of wisdom. This can be concluded as a requirement to acknowledge one's own cognitive limitations, a concept that can be further interpreted and expanded upon as follows.

### 2.1.1 Epistemic Accuracy

Evidently, recognizing how little one is informed is not an impeccable definition of wisdom. We can, say, imagine someone who is fully conscious of the fact that she barely knows anything, but she is indeed ill-informed, then it seems implausible to regard such a person as a wise individual, for it is commonly acknowledged that wise people should be, at least, knowledgeable to a certain extent. Even in Socrates's journey, those candidates for wisdom are at a minimum perceived to possess knowledge surpassing that of ordinary people in specific fields. Socrates's insight suggests that merely possessing extensive information is not sufficient for wisdom. If individuals overestimate their knowledge or believe that they have a higher epistemic status than they actually do, they will lose their opportunity to be considered for the title of wisdom. Let us refer to this essential characteristic for the wise as "epistemic accuracy."

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, "Apology," in *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 21-23b.

Epistemic accuracy can be succinctly described as the ability to accurately grasp one's own cognitive state. On the one hand, it is to delimit what is grasped by the subject. Wise individuals reflect on what they are informed, basing their wisdom on self-awareness of their information. Without this, even poets who create beautiful and inspirational prose without understanding its underlying meaning might be mistakenly seen as wise. On the other hand, it involves maintaining a healthy amount of humility, as excessive reluctance to acknowledge one's wisdom is also unwise. Had Socrates never accepted the oracle's declaration, it is unlikely that he would be regarded as a paragon of wisdom in this narrative. While wise individuals may not show off their wisdom, they are expected to confidently defend their beliefs when challenged.

### 2.1.2 Epistemic Humility

To go a little bit further from here, let us imagine someone who has a good grasp of her information storage, but she frequently brags about her knowledge. Then, even if she does possess much quasi-wisdom, it still seems counter-intuitive for us to grant her that she is wise. This natural inclination appears to imply a requirement of epistemic humility for the wise. Why do we expect wise people to be modest? Some reasons can immediately come to our mind. For instance, being (reasonably) humble is inherently an epistemic virtue, and it is hard to imagine a wise epistemic agent who is not virtuous. Or even less contentiously, one might simply claim that modesty is traditionally associated with the image of good inquirers, and it is hard to imagine anyone who is wise but not good at inquiry. However, unlike epistemic accuracy, epistemic humility might not be that closely associated with epistemic evaluation. After all, it is not difficult to find examples of highly intelligent individuals who lack modesty or even respect for those who demonstrate humility.

Regarding this, what might be interesting to mention additionally is another possible reason that can be derived from the internal perspective of the wise: The long-standing debates surrounding whether people can indeed know anything reflect the complexity of judging one's epistemic status. Even though common sense suggests that

people do know many things, and when our focus is zoomed in on particular epistemic claims, it becomes easier to determine if the claims stand or not, there is little debate over the complexity involved in evaluating the quality of one's broader epistemic state, which usually involves multiple aspects and layers of beliefs. In this context, we have to examine the situation carefully before making an appropriate evaluation. For example, when someone says that she knows that there is a cup of water in front of her, it seems examining directly related factors like her immediate evidence or the reliability of her perception are enough to decide whether she is entitled to such a claim. By contrast, if we want to judge whether or not she is a reliable source of information producing this testimony, we might be burdened with a more thorough examination of her general epistemic condition, especially considering the supporting background information. This might go as far as inspecting her basic idea about various disciplines, such as biology regarding the function of sight, psychology regarding the reception of signals, physics regarding the state of containment, chemistry regarding the nature of cups and water. Furthermore, she might even be questioned more profoundly regarding her preparation for potential skeptic challenges to her belief base.

These considerations are most likely not necessary or even helpful in daily life inquiry. Yet, they suggest that, ultimately, it is extremely difficult to make a guaranteed positive statement reporting one's general cognitive situation in the strictest sense. Similarly, given that wisdom is typically regarded as a general epistemic virtue, it is also difficult to judge decisively that someone is wise. If we acknowledge that this is a reasonable perspective easily accepted by anyone with a sound mind, then wise individuals, who are at least good inquirers (especially when they are associated with the feature of epistemic accuracy), should also recognize it. What naturally follows is that anyone who is aware of such restriction regarding making ultimately absolute epistemic claims, would be inclined to maintain a low profile when holding relevant beliefs, and stay cautious while curious about the unknown. This seems to correspond to the impression of humble people

that we have in mind, and why the wise behaving as such would align with the image of the humble is thus explained.<sup>1</sup>

In this narration, epistemic accuracy may be seen as a part of, or a prerequisite of epistemic humility, as to stay humble one must first understand her epistemic status considering the information that she possesses. In addition, epistemic humility may cover even more features than one might first have in mind when understood more broadly. For instance, Sharon Ryan mentions a separate condition in her first category, namely, forming beliefs scrupulously and being skeptical in a healthy way, which somehow matches some aspects we just mentioned in the description of humble wise individuals. That said, the above discussion is also not exhaustive. Except for epistemic humility, there are evidently more reasonable requirements for the wise that can be included in a more comprehensive list. For example, epistemic virtues that are expected to exert their force like epistemic prudence, which connect more, or even all virtues that a wise epistemic agent is supposed to possess. The conception of wisdom as connecting various epistemic virtues corresponds to a typical understanding of wisdom that wisdom is a virtue that unifies different virtues in the field of epistemology.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, I will refrain from further exploration of potential epistemic characteristics pertinent to wisdom and their underlying supporting intuitions. The main goal of this subsection is to illustrate that there are certain epistemic characteristics typically associated with wisdom, and those attributed with wisdom are expected to manifest these characteristics. What is important to note is that viewing this association as such is to suggest that commonly there is a requirement for the wise to possess certain epistemic characteristics such as epistemic humility, rather than merely considering whether wisdom can be theorized in terms of being an epistemic characteristic. The key difference is that viewing the issue from the former perspective, in effect, proposes that a plausible theory, which our theorization obviously aims at achieving, should take into account this requirement, which is anticipated to cover epistemic accuracy, epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> Another aspect of boasting's counter-intuitiveness relates to the issue that we often find claims of success unconvincing if they are not grounded in practical results. This emphasis on actual outcomes connects to the third category that will be discussed in Subsection 2.3.

<sup>2</sup> For discussions on various interpretations of the unity theses of virtues, and the analogy between the unity of moral and intellectual virtues, see Alan T Wilson, "Unity of the Intellectual Virtues," *Synthese* 199, no. 3-4 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-021-03227-z>.

humility, epistemic prudence, etc. This thus constitutes a condition that should be included in the basic framework for wisdom theorization.<sup>1</sup>

Viewing the first category as the initial requirements helps us understand why the second and third categories are needed. The reason is that epistemic characteristics alone are not sufficient to render someone wise — specific beliefs and their application in reality are also typically expected from the wise, as it is difficult to imagine anyone who lacks a basic belief base or never appears to stand a chance of succeeding could ever be considered a wise person. In this light, the aspects of wisdom being a targeted epistemic goal and realization of epistemic content are not introduced as potential replacement theories, but as complementary to the common conception of wisdom. We now turn first to the information and level of assurance wise people, equipped with the required epistemic characteristics, are commonly anticipated to possess.

## 2.2 Wisdom as Epistemic Target Object

Examining the content that wise individuals are expected to acquire is in other words an examination of what they are expected to pursue using their epistemic characteristics. What I have in mind here is that epistemic targets can be varied: correct epistemic judgments, prudent epistemic decisions, realistic epistemic planning, etc.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, for the sake of coverage, we will use the term “epistemic target object” in this context. However, it is important to note that in epistemological discussions, what

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<sup>1</sup> Readers may notice that characteristics attributed to wise individuals can also be non-epistemic. Take empathy, for instance. While emotions like empathy are often seen as contrary to beliefs, we expect wise people to not only understand human empathy but also embody it. However, even when focusing on a non-epistemic trait like empathy, the presence of epistemic content — such as self-awareness or reflection on one’s emotions — remains crucial. We would find it peculiar for a wise person to merely exhibit appropriate emotions without any introspective understanding of such feelings. For the sake of clarity in our discussion, non-epistemic aspects like these will be examined separately under the practical aspect of wisdom in Subsection 2.3 of this chapter. This might initially seem contentious, as emotions are sometimes viewed as an independent dimension of wisdom. Yet, it can also be argued that the division between epistemic and non-epistemic characteristics is not strictly necessary (this will be explored further in Chapter 5, Subsection 1.2.3). In any case, the decision to separate these aspects is mainly for ease of discussion, adhering to the conventional distinction between the epistemic and the practical.

<sup>2</sup> It might be possible to evaluate the wisdom of a judgment separately from the wisdom of the individual making it. This possibility will be explored in Subsection 2.3, specifically in Sub-subsection 2.3.3.

epistemic agents are supposed to aim at is often equivalent to certain epistemic statuses, such as justified beliefs, knowledge, and understanding. This is also almost the case in the literature about wisdom. While subsequent chapters may suggest otherwise, it is foreseeable that there are likely limits to what constitutes proper epistemic target objects for wise people. As far as the currently mainstream literature is concerned, these restrictions are mainly set in terms of the target objects' subject fields and the quality threshold of their possession.

### 2.2.1 Areas of Mastery for the Wise

According to Sharon Ryan, two-type theories, which validate wisdom based on either of two types, oversimplify the attainment of wisdom.<sup>1</sup> Though many philosophers take wisdom as primarily practical knowledge/belief, true wisdom must be supplemented by theoretical knowledge/belief.<sup>2</sup> Sharon Ryan's reasoning may seem a bit simplistic, but she does point out that those who only excel at practice without any mastery of disciplinary basics are considerably less likely to be recognized as wise. However, the crux here appears to be that when the term "wisdom" is used without further qualification, it simultaneously requires both theoretical and practical wisdom. This consideration, valid or not, does not directly address the existence of two distinct and independent types of wisdom. In contrast, the issue of harmonization that prompted our exploration seems to suggest that there is a unifying conception of wisdom irrespective of its application in different fields or employment from different perspectives. This insight into wisdom is related to a generic use (or, more specifically, a normative generic use) of the term "wisdom," emphasizing that a core meaning is retained in plausible uses of the term. It needs to be differentiated from the general use of "wisdom," which focuses on one of the aspects of its usage: being used without qualification. Nevertheless, the latter issue is also intriguing to explore a little further.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 103.



## General Use of Wisdom

Proposing a unified conception of wisdom can be reserved, in the sense that it merely suggests that the term “wisdom” used across various contexts carries some shared features to pick out similar phenomenon. This does not imply that wisdom in specific fields is indistinguishable. After all, it is commonsensical for us to tell theoretical wisdom from practical wisdom, and distinguish domain-specific wisdom from each other. What Sharon Ryan mentions is a separate issue. That is, such distinction might have been excessively taken for granted, to the extent that some philosophers might consciously make a proposal about using “wisdom” standing for specific wisdom, particularly practical wisdom.<sup>1</sup> What is counterintuitive here is that we do seem to be able to use “wisdom” without qualification, and this general use of “wisdom” seems to require more than just wisdom of a particular field, while also not every kind of wisdom. The tension is perhaps most fierce when considering the relationship between wisdom *per se* and practical wisdom, which implicitly takes up much of our attention when we discuss one’s wisdom in daily life, as it seems that dealing with life issues is the most noticeable aspect in the evaluation of one’s general level of wisdom. Nevertheless, the following example illustrates why wisdom is not synonymous with practical wisdom:

Now, consider two people, A and B, with equal amounts of the knowledge featured in the best practical view. Suppose that A has much more of the best non-practical knowledge than does B. Suppose, even, that A has all of the best non-practical knowledge, and that B has very little or none of it. Is A wiser than B?

I would certainly say so. But if in this case A is wiser than B, then wisdom cannot just be practical knowledge. Hence the best practical view of wisdom is implausible; it runs aground on the fact that we can gain wisdom without gaining practical knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

In this case, Whitcomb highlights that there is more than one kind of wisdom, and non-practical wisdom also matters in general wisdom assessment. Thus, distinguishing general wisdom from more specific forms becomes more plausible. That said, in which specific domain might we find the existence of wisdom? Whitcomb believes that the rather

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Tsai, *Wisdom: A Skill Theory*.

<sup>2</sup> Whitcomb, "Wisdom," p. 99.

conventional distinction between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom is reasonable, which is typically considered as stemming from Aristotle, he disagrees with Aristotle's account of them. First, he claims that intuition is not the only means to acquire theoretical wisdom; we can rely on things like deep empirical knowledge of physics to become theoretically wise. Second, he maintains that wisdom does not require practical application, and wise people need not possess virtues, as exemplified by a wise individual who, despite addiction forced by drug use, retains wisdom. In Whitcomb's view, this person is clearly no longer virtuous, but her wisdom remains intact, and a virtue theory cannot explain this intuition.<sup>1</sup>

Whitcomb labels theories rooted in the Aristotelian distinction as "twofold virtue theories." To overcome their issue(s), Whitcomb proposes his twofold consequentialism. This new theory stresses that the epistemic value of phenomena like "evidence gathering, research program design, library book acquisition policy, and educational curricula"<sup>2</sup> consists in epistemically good consequences, which include wisdom. From this perspective, wisdom should be evaluated as the end to be reached or produced, and its epistemic value does not come from the process or the results of cognition but from wisdom's self-constituting good end. Whitcomb argues that two types of wisdom emerge from sound epistemic processes: theoretical wisdom, characterized by deep understanding, and practical wisdom, defined as knowing how to live well.<sup>3</sup>

According to Whitcomb, theoretical wisdom involves a deep, non-superficial understanding, e.g., theoretical wisdom of chemistry is systematic knowledge of the basic chemical structures and laws that govern the interactions between them. The more fundamental one's explanatory knowledge, the greater her capacity to elucidate concepts in related fields.<sup>4</sup> Practical wisdom, on the other hand, encompasses not just knowledge of living well but also discernment of which life goals contribute to such a state. If one possesses practical wisdom, to wit, knowing how to live well, then she should: first, know,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-101.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 101-02.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

at least some, sets of goals, by achieving which one can live sufficiently well; and second, know, at least some, ways, by utilizing which she can achieve these goals sufficiently.<sup>1</sup>

Given Whitcomb's argument against twofold virtue theories centers on the superfluousness of practical application, potential doubts regarding this counterargument will be addressed in Subsection 2.3, where the practical aspect of wisdom will be delved upon. Here, let us focus on Whitcomb's own theory. While Whitcomb's proposed case seems to plausibly illustrate the coexistence of different types of wisdom involved in our general consideration of one's wisdom, his interpretation of theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom seems to be in lack of reflecting the shared featured between them. This potentially challenges the generic use of wisdom that we seek if it leads to a thorough separation between the two concepts. However, to think that there might be a separation is misleading for two reasons. On the one hand, Whitcomb's analysis of Aristotle's theory seems to be mistaken. Though space does not allow a full review of Aristotle's theories of wisdom, it may be generally agreed that both theoretical and practical wisdom in Aristotle's works, when function as virtues, aim at truth.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Whitcomb's interpretation of Aristotle's "theoretical wisdom" seems to be like "wisdom in the theoretical studies", which might sound intuitive to modern ears (just as his addition of means to acquire such wisdom), but renders the subject field more prominent while the features of wisdom shared with other field's wisdom less prominent. If both notions can be affiliated to a greater concept in light of the pursuit of truth among other elements, then the connection between these two concepts should be more pronounced.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, as can be seen in the case of chemistry, what Whitcomb really expresses by "theoretical wisdom" is, more or less, knowledge of specific subject fields, and Whitcomb's distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom delineates the difference between wisdom in specific fields and that in everyday life. Even if we focus on this meaning and disregard the traditional connection established between theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> C. D. C. Reeve, "Aristotle on the Virtues of Thought," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 198.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion on this issue, see, for example, Jason Baehr, "Two Types of Wisdom," *Acta Analytica* 27 (2012): p. 89, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-012-0155-3>.

wisdom and practical wisdom, wisdom of specific disciplines can hardly be separated from wisdom of life, since if the former means deep understanding of the highest principles and basic knowledge of certain domains, then when the subject shifts from a specific field to life itself, this explanatory model still works, with tiny adjustment needed to indicate that wisdom of life is deep understanding of the highest principles and basic knowledge of life. As a result, Whitcomb's explanation of two types of wisdom can still be considered as different application of the same conception of wisdom in terms of the target object that epistemic subjects are expected to achieve.

### **Generic Use of Wisdom in Different Fields**

The lack of mention of the generic use of "wisdom" is not the only point questionable in Whitcomb's proposal. One may question whether Aristotle, or the traditional distinction between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom is reliable.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the meaning of "being wise" and "being wise in something" seem also self-evidently distinct. As is noted by Andrew P. Norman, when "wisdom" is used without qualification, it refers to primary wisdom, and in the meanwhile, there exists wisdom of specific fields.<sup>2</sup> We should be reminded that when Socrates looks for wise people, he pays special attention to those who are reputed the most in their trades. An important reason is that "wisdom" in ancient Greek covers a large scale of meaning, ranging from craftsmen's techniques to truth of the world. Zhan Wenjie notes that *Sophia*, commonly translated as "wisdom," can convey various meanings depending on the context, including: (i) cleverness and intelligence (ii) technique (iii) theoretical understanding and rational insight, and (iv) practical wisdom and prudence, etc.<sup>3</sup> Socrates even frequently interchanges "wisdom" with other technical vocabulary in knowledge-related discussion, even though

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Yu Zhenhua argues that Aristotle's framework of wisdom involves not just theoretical and practical wisdom, but also technical wisdom. See Zhen-hua Yu, "On Three Kinds of Wisdom," *Journal of East China Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 52, no. 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.16382/j.cnki.1000-5579.2020.05.006>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew P. Norman, "Teaching Wisdom," in *Knowledge, Teaching And Wisdom*, ed. Keith Lehrer et al. (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 1996), p. 253.

<sup>3</sup> Wenjie Zhan, *A Study on Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Yang Huang and Fengfeng Gao, *Studies on Western Classics*, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2020), p. 15.

he makes rather clear distinction between different types of beliefs.<sup>1</sup> So, in this context, wise people are not always unapproachable sages in our modern imagination — they may be those who only excel in their profession. As for today, though “wisdom” is usually attributed to those who know about living well, it is still possible to be applied with qualification to people who have understanding in limited fields like wisdom of management. Therefore, it seems that “wisdom” does not only point to everyday life wisdom, but also an abundance of knowledge or skillfulness in particular fields.

However, some philosophers may disagree with this distinction. For example, Jason Baehr suggests that there is only one wisdom that cannot be further divided into general wisdom and wisdom of specific fields. Instead, the word “wisdom” refers only to particular wisdom. His interpretation of wisdom goes as follows:

To be wise relative to a given domain D is (1) to know what is basic or fundamental in D, (2) to understand how the other elements of D stand in relation to the more basic elements, (3) to be competent at applying this cognitive perspective to new or particular contexts or questions proper to D, and (4) to be disposed to respond appropriately to judgments resulting from these applications.<sup>2</sup>

Grimm calls this view as “the genus-species view of wisdom” and rejects it for the following reasons: First, people gravitate towards examples of being “generally” wise when asked about who is wise, instead of being wise in specific fields. Second, wisdom cannot be properly associated with every specific domain. For instance, to say someone is wise in logic or mathematics seem to be weird, as in these fields intelligence is a more appropriate word for deep understanding. Lastly, it is acceptable that someone is only wise in particular domain, but not in general, *vice versa*.<sup>3</sup> Grimm’s argument appears compelling. Yet, there might be a deeper reason that needs to be added — that is, there is certain common ground shared by both general and particular wisdom. In fact, Grimm also spots

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh H. Benson, *Socratic Wisdom: The Model of Knowledge in Plato's Early Dialogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Manuscript, 15, cited in Grimm, "Wisdom," p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

that it is possible to construct a hyper-structure for both wisdom on the whole and wisdom in specific fields. His solution utilizes the idea of “focal meaning”<sup>1</sup>:

Knowing how to live well is what we might call the ‘focal meaning’ of the concept wisdom, with other uses of the concept counting as analogical extensions thereof.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, wisdom’s focal meaning is knowing how to live well, and as long as a field is suitable to be applied with the structure of this understanding, the concept of wisdom can be used *mutatis mutandis*. For example, gardening, stock analysis, etc. A prominent feature of these jobs is that they notably lack certainty, and so does life. On the contrary, in scenarios like mathematics and logics, where decidability is expected and required, it sounds awkward to pursue wisdom.<sup>3</sup> In short, for Grimm, wisdom in a specific field, relatively independent of general wisdom, exists in domains where, like daily life, a clear guiding principle is absent. This seems to suggest that Grimm will agree that an account of general wisdom can also be applied to wisdom of specific fields after certain adjustment, since the latter is an analogy of the former.

Grimm’s view is very interesting and illuminating. For one, drawing on his interpretation, we can have a plausible basis to clarify the relationship between different “types” of wisdom. For example, the connection between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom now becomes the connection between specific wisdom and life wisdom, namely, wisdom of two different subjects. For another, we can identify the analogous uses of “wisdom” without assuming detailed content, which is often loaded without awareness by many theorists.<sup>4</sup> However, one might wonder why Grimm has to assume the “focal meaning” of wisdom, which appears to be quite burdensome as it is both difficult and non-beneficial to convince people that their usage of a concept in certain circumstances is not “focal.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Following G.E.L. Owen [1960].” (G.E.L. Owen, "Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle," *Symposium Aristotelicum* 2 (1960).) Noted by Grimm.

<sup>2</sup> Grimm, "Wisdom," p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-51.

<sup>4</sup> This point will become clearer as we delve into discussions on some implicit mainstream epistemological presumptions in the subsequent chapters.

Moreover, although the analogous use of “wisdom” seems rooted in its focal meaning, it could also be considered a relatively independent concept. The direction that Grimm leads can be furthered as suggesting that our conception of wisdom can be seen as the pursuit of certainty in areas where fundamental principles are yet to be fully understood or established. It does not necessitate a presumption of the focal meaning of wisdom, and while it also appears to be merely a guess, it is relatively less difficult to accept. This is because certainty has long been recognized as what people pursue because of their nature.<sup>1</sup> Specifically in epistemology, there have been generations of debates between skeptics and epistemologists over the certainty of knowledge. Even though not all epistemological principles written by the philosophers are unquestionable, when they fail to make sense in reality, people still tend to look for a substitutional set of rules that provides temporary certainty, instead of simply giving up the pursuit of guaranteed possession of knowledge.

This natural inclination effectively explains why people pursue “wisdom” as a substitute for guiding principles in various fields. Still furthermore, although the setting of the focal meaning of wisdom helps to make sense of the connection among various application of wisdom, the suitable use assumption seems to be able to make similar sense independently. In light of the common use as replacement of highest principles, both living and other analogous fields mentioned by Grimm are fields where the highest principles are unclear but still pursued, and there is no need to set one of them as the original source of the “focal meaning” of this concept. Of course, it is not difficult to notice that when “wisdom” is utilized without qualification, it usually refers to “wisdom of life,” but this phenomenon can be explained by the fact that life is the primary and most general activity that people participate in, and, therefore, wisdom of life is also the primary and most general wisdom that people find no need to qualify in daily language.

Considering that the focal meaning assumption is neither easily defensible nor clearly advantageous, compared to the more plausible assumption of its suitable use, it is more practical and less problematic to consider that generally, “wisdom” relates to understanding what is important and how to achieve it in areas with uncertain guiding principles, without necessarily prioritizing the wisdom of life. Drawing on this assumption,

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 4, *The Later Works 1925-1953*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

we may distinguish wisdom on the whole from wisdom of specific fields by considering them as different application of the same basic idea in different contexts, to wit, in general life issues and more specific domains.<sup>1</sup>

### **General Wisdom and Domain-Specific Wisdom**

The above discussion seems to propose that various use of wisdom can be seen as application of one core meaning to different subjects. Whether this assumption is an attempt to reveal the underlying meaning of or to rationalize the actual use of “wisdom,” a significant implication of it is that it is not necessary to treat wisdom *simpliciter* thoroughly separately from other wisdom. However, this is not to deny our linguistic intuition that general life wisdom is indeed usually considered not only as what comes to our mind when it comes to someone’s wisdom, but also a higher-ranked achievement than domain-specific wisdom. After all, general wisdom manifests more generally. Given that wisdom is difficult to attain as well as maintain, this implies a greater challenge for one to sustain an already difficult state, and is thus a greater accomplishment when succeeding. Considering these and the limited room of this thesis, for our current purposes of exploring the nuances of generic wisdom, it seems that it is more efficient to focus on this higher level of wisdom that is more directly concerned with everyday context, and then apply the insights thus gained to more specific wisdom through their connection in the future. That said, before we proceed, there seem to be some issues regarding the further relationship between wisdom *simpliciter* and that of particular fields that might need to be clarified in advance.

The first issue we might encounter is about the coexistence of these two types of wisdom. While domain-specific wisdom encompasses distinct subject matters tied to specific disciplines or professions, it is essential to recognize that regardless of our job, we are perpetually engaged in living and addressing life’s challenges. This implies that specific wisdom invariably contributes to, or is related to, general wisdom. Consequently, it raises the question of why general wisdom is not merely an accumulation of various specific wisdoms, but instead is treated as a distinct topic. This consideration is understandable as there is overlapping area between wisdom of living well and wisdom of specific fields. For

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<sup>1</sup> To maintain clarity in our current discussion, the connection between the generic assumption about wisdom in the epistemological context and the normative generic understanding of wisdom will be explored later in Sub-subsection 2.2.3.



example, it is generally presumed that a wise person would not idly watch others in peril without attempting to intervene; yet, effective action is contingent upon possessing basic commonsense and strategic knowledge (e.g., methods of rescue or seeking help). We may not require a generally wise person to be a trained first responder being wise in her job, but she is demanded to possess some basic belief that also constitutes wisdom on a less general level to be wise overall. However, issues on life level are not only most general, but also sometimes transcend particular concerns. It is evident that general wisdom does not necessitate wisdom of every specific field. For instance, one might be wise while being really bad at investment. In this scenario there is no chance for her to be ascribed wisdom of investment. Yet, she can maintain being wise by exerting what she is good at and avoiding what she is bad at, such as investing. On the other hand, merely adding up a select scope of domain-specific wisdom is also not sufficient for tackling the problems that general wisdom is expected to respond. For example, death is not a topic typically invoked in whichever particular context, but it is perhaps always an important aspect to be considered in wisdom *simpliciter*. For those who are wise but do not work in relevant industries, or are not particularly pressed on or affected by relevant events, they might not learn much about death from their daily experience, but they are still expected to offer insights on it.

The overlap between general wisdom and domain-specific wisdom, however, might raise a second issue. Consider the following case provided by an anonymous reviewer of Sharon Ryan's paper:

Imagine B...an aging film director attends an awards ceremony in the hope he will finally receive a prestigious award. However, it is his son, not him, who receives the award. An emotionally intelligent (and more broadly wise) person in this situation will control his disappointment and share in the joy of his son. An emotionally immature person, by contrast, may find it difficult to congratulate his son and may, instead, make a disparaging remark about the son's award-winning film. But it is difficult to see how the difference between the two cases could be construed as a difference in the degree of epistemic rationality between the two agents. The father lacking in emotional intelligence may not have any unjustified beliefs relevant to the issue at hand. He may, for instance, believe with very good justification that: this is his last chance to get the award while the son is just starting, that were it not for his help, the son would have never become a director, that the son will now receive more accolades than he ever had. He could even have the fully justified belief that his own film is better than that of his son. The difference

between the two agents may come down to something quite different from epistemic justification.<sup>1</sup>

The initial intent of this case is to challenge Sharon Ryan's criteria for the epistemic justification of wisdom. Nevertheless, for our current purpose, what is more interesting to note is that, in this case, there appears to be some ambiguity or even confusion between general wisdom and domain-specific wisdom. When soliciting a response from a wise individual in a specific situation, it might not be clear which type of wise reaction is expected: One might be wise only in this given context and similar particular situations, but one might also be wise in general and is thus able to respond to challenges that happen in this special situation. Wise reactions in these two different meanings may share some, or even many common factors, but they can also vary a lot. In this case, possible subject matters of discussion of wisdom range from "wisdom of a ceremony," "how to deal with the feeling of being overshadowed by my own son," to "how to deal with this particular situation considering leading a generally good life." The appropriate solution may vary substantially, depending on which option and pertinent details are considered. For example, the father may control his emotions as the referee requires when the focus is limited to certain immediate concerns, but he may also be considered wise if he finds a way to express his true feeling and makes people realize the value of genuine expressions and thereby contribute greatly to the reduction of pretentiousness and hypocrites in the world. Even if we limit the scope to only apparently same performance, one may do so for very different reasons. For example, the father may remain calm for the order of the event, which is important to the industry that he cares most in his life, but he might also do so for the harmony of his family, which he considers most important for his general happiness. Therefore, diverse solutions can be proposed to serve as wise judgments in the same situation, and they may be paired with very different underlying intentions. These potentially wise judgments may lead to different plans for action that cannot coexist in reality. As a result, to lead an efficient discussion of wisdom, a clear distinction between different contexts is needed. Specifically, one's general life and the particular scenario in

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Sharon Ryan, "A Deeper Defense of the Deep Rationality Theory of Wisdom: A Reply to Fileva and Tresan," *Acta Analytica* 32 (2017): p. 119, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-016-0291-2>.

question constitute two prominent scopes of considerations to be taken into account that need to be differentiated.

A straightforward yet effective approach to distinguishing these two aspects of wisdom can be gleaned from Aristotle's thought on happiness. According to Rosalind Hursthouse, practical wisdom in Aristotle's works refers to choosing primarily what benefits one's life in general and makes her obtain the happiest life as a citizen living in her political community. Therefore, one's happiness should not be assessed merely by its total amount, but also by its sufficiency and distribution across different life stages.<sup>1</sup> In this light, whenever we evaluate how wise a judgment is in terms of life issues, we can consider whether the amount of happiness it brings to an agent can make her happy throughout her life. This way of evaluation should effectively distinguish itself from evaluation focusing on how well the judgment works in a specific scenario. A related point to mention here is that it seems advisable that we cease to think that a wise person is able to deal with any challenges encountered in her life, because this requirement is simply unclear to indicate which subject matter of wisdom it is talking about. And a person who is wise in general does not necessarily need to possess much information beyond how to live well in the general sense.

### 2.2.2 Threshold for Epistemic Content Contributing to Wisdom

With this understanding of how to tell wisdom *simpliciter* from other wisdom, we can now concentrate on wisdom of general life issues as the exemplary application of wisdom's (normative) generic use. Readers may have noticed that, along with our discussion of the subject fields of wisdom talks, epistemologists are also suggesting certain epistemic status for the wise to achieve, especially knowledge. Broadly speaking, a commonsensical expectation for the wise is that they should be superior to ordinary people in producing epistemic outcomes. This seems to imply a threshold starting from which can

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, "XI\*—Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (Hardback)* 106, no. 1 (2006): p. 307, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9264.2006.00149.x>.

we regard an epistemic agent as “superior,” albeit it might be less measurable than a specific point. This threshold can be interpreted from two aspects:

First, it is intuitive for us to expect wise individuals to possess quite a lot of information in the domain where they are considered wise. Regarding the paradigmatic subject field of life issues, people anticipate acquiring precious advice for conducting a happy life from the wise, which suggests that sages possess enough information to generate such guidance. This “enough” condition might serve as a sensible quantitative threshold. However, in epistemology, it is usually the quality of information that matters. Moreover, if we are seeking a generic use highlighting shared features across contexts of the concept of wisdom, then the quantity requirement does not seem to apply universally. After all, even if an agent is almost always foolish, for just one single wise judgment, she could be understandably considered wise at that particular moment.

This case leads us to the second possible interpretation: when wisdom is considered generically, there might be a qualitative threshold at play. If we envision wisdom primarily as a human trait, then the minimum threshold for such wisdom should require human beliefs. These beliefs demonstrate the potential for conscious awareness and the ability to reflect on the information held. This idea becomes clearer when contrasted with the non-reflective beliefs in animals and the information stored in artificial intelligence, which is non-comparable to any belief. Furthermore, since wise individuals are typically good epistemic agents, who are typically expected to possess not mere beliefs but justified beliefs, the threshold for them should also require justification.<sup>1</sup> So far, so good, but the threshold becomes more disputable regarding knowledge requirements, often interpreted as an evolved form of justified belief — justified true belief, despite some contention. Sharon Ryan contends that knowledge is not the essential component of wisdom, because bad luck should not interfere with one’s acquisition of wisdom. She presents a vivid scenario to illustrate why:

[...] consider two people, Flo and Joe. Imagine that [...] Flo is wise. Imagine that Flo and Joe have the same evidence, the same beliefs, the same values, the same interest in learning, etc. The only difference between Flo and Joe is that Flo is in

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<sup>1</sup> The requirement for good epistemic agents to have justification for their beliefs is typically associated with the epistemological tradition of valuing truth, which will be explored in Chapter 4.

the real world and most of her beliefs are true. Joe, unfortunately, is in a Matrix-like world that seems just like Flo's world. When Flo believes she's talking to real people in a real world, she's right. When Joe has the exact same experiences, he's deceived. He's an unfortunate victim of mass deception.<sup>1</sup>

In Sharon Ryan's view, although Flo is evidently better off, she and Joe are each wise in their respective worlds. Epistemic luck may influence the evaluation of one's wisdom, but it should not affect their qualification.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, an agent only needs justified belief to be wise. In addition, it might be worth noting that "justified" is supposed to be interpreted in an objectivist sense:

[...] it is important to acknowledge that my theory is definitely meant to have an exclusively objectivist interpretation of epistemic justification. All I mean by 'objectivist' is that what matters is whether one's beliefs are *actually supported* by evidence or reliably formed, rather than that one *merely thinks that* his or her beliefs are supported by evidence or reliably formed.<sup>3</sup>

However, Sharon Ryan's analysis is not the only reading of the role that luck plays in the process of becoming wise. For instance, Fileva and Tresan takes epistemic luck as a necessary component of wisdom, and they argue that bad luck may not disqualify one from being wise, but the possibility remains.<sup>4</sup> Sharon Ryan's stance on this issue might be preferable in light of epistemological tradition, where it is against our intuition that things having nothing to do with one's cognitive ability like luck can be counted as a part of the criteria of the evaluation of an epistemic status. Nevertheless, there are also recognized examples of the wise who do not manifest features that are typically expected from the epistemological perspective (more on this in Section 3). More importantly, once we realize that her objectivist account unavoidably presumes that objective facts exist and she is not holding back when it comes to practice, emotions and ethics, a great number of strong counterexamples will emerge, e.g., ethical relativism, challenges from reproducing emotional reactions, etc. What is more confusing is that Sharon Ryan has already noticed

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> This point is related to her broader "Deep Rationality Theory" of wisdom, which posits rationality at the core of wisdom.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> Iskra Fileva and Jon Tresan, "Wisdom Beyond Rationality: A Reply to Ryan," *Acta Analytica* 28 (2013): p. 230, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-012-0171-31>.

that much so-called “knowledge” in the history has already been abandoned in the development of human history,<sup>1</sup> which seems to directly contradict her favor upon unchangeable objectivist justified belief. It is possible that what she has in mind is some sort of ideal situation where when people assess their wisdom, they have perfect evidence to rely on, but such ideal seems to be too far away from reality and, thus, reduces the plausibility of Sharon Ryan’s standard of wisdom, as the qualification cannot be carried out in ordinary world.

Even if we do accept that, ultimately, human beings can come close enough to this ideal state of cognition and only under such circumstances can we be acknowledged as true sages, a more challenging difficulty will still be encountered: Following the objectivist requirement, Sharon Ryan will inevitably maintain that there is a universally shared absolute account of wisdom, which leads to the result that those who are qualified as wise people in a remote or ancient tribe are very likely not in fact wise. In Sharon Ryan’s opinion, a relativistic view of wisdom means that “as long as the elder has a lot of knowledge *relative to her society and time period*, she lives successfully *relative to her society and time period*, and she has few unjustified beliefs *compared to others in her society and time period*, then she is wise *for her society and time period*.” And she rejects it because, first, people have no satisfying answers to those complicated questions like “What is a society?” “What is the society that people belong to?” and “What is a period of time?”. With these unsolved myths in mind, a relativist interpretation of wisdom cannot help us better understand or evaluate wisdom. Second, even with these questions resolved, a relativist stance could create a loophole, allowing people to easily attain wisdom by joining a less developed society, contradicting the intuitive belief that wisdom is hard to attain.<sup>2</sup>

Though Sharon Ryan’s concerns are comprehensible, her argument for her insist on an absolutist account does not seem to be impeccable: Her worries over the perplexity of locating the social community or the time period that a sage candidate belongs to are well grounded, but difficulty does not always result in impossibility. Such undertaking may be sometimes controversial but is still a necessary part for most agent-based research work,

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," pp. 105-06.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

and we do have much consensus over a general picture of different agents' life, which is enough for us to, or at least allows us to discuss their state of cognition in a given context. If Sharon Ryan's reasons to doubt spatial-temporal positioning are valid, then many research projects relying on it, especially in social science, will look ridiculous, and that is far from our common opinion in reality.

This context-limited perspective is also helpful in rejecting Sharon Ryan's second argument — that is, a relativist theory of wisdom may empower an agent to suddenly become wise by joining an ignorant tribe. The fact is that an agent cannot be cut out from her background and be evaluated for her level of wisdom without considering the conditions of her mental development. If an agent is trained by a seasoned educator, then she must undergo a carefully designed examination to prove her wisdom, otherwise she may just be reporting what she has been informed. On the other hand, if an agent lives in the poorest village of the world, then her poverty and lack of resources must be taken into account when we assess her wisdom. It is possible for us to imagine that even the wisest person living in a remote and undeveloped region is less wise than an ordinary person in a civilized world, since people's average level of wisdom is supposed to rise along with the growth of economy and education. Nevertheless, all humans have the potential to become wise, regardless of when or where they live. And an absolutist structure of theory does not seem to be compatible with the phenomenon that wisdom can be simultaneously acknowledged in drastically different living conditions. Moreover, if this line of reasoning is followed, then it might lead to an additional theoretical merit. Given that wisdom is broadly recognized as measurable, the relativizability of the justification requirement for wise individuals' beliefs offers a potential method to assess their level of wisdom: We may compare people's possession of wisdom with the help of the range that it is justified: the longer the time one is reputed for wisdom is, or the greater the community one's wisdom is admired is, the wiser the agent is.

The above discussion suggests that it might be more plausible to set the requirement for wise people's epistemic base not higher than justified belief. This proposal, arguably, may be more readily acceptable.<sup>1</sup> However, at the same time, it seems to also suggest that

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion will be revisited in Chapter 4 in the new light of the subsequent chapters' conclusions, which are difficult to be presented at this juncture.

the standard for evaluating wisdom candidates' beliefs' justification should be discussed relationally. This is a complicated issue pertinent to several levels of considerations. To begin with, it is directly concerned with the setting of epistemic target object, which we will delve into in the following sub-subsection. More interestingly, the underlying concern will appear as extending beyond the variability of the evaluation standard for wisdom, to other issues discussed in this section as well. For instance, while limiting the requirement to possessing justified beliefs may prevent the exclusion of certain recognized wise figures for lacking true beliefs, it may not intuitively align with the expectation that wise individuals should know about truth.<sup>1</sup> This, to spoil a bit, ultimately leads us back to the overarching issue about normative generic use of wisdom. Nevertheless, for the sake of a more comprehensive review of contemporary epistemologists' offerings on wisdom, we will restrict our discussion in the next sub-subsection to the conventional scope of epistemic content, which will be followed by an additional discussion of the practical aspect of wisdom before we probe in the overarching issue in Section 3.

### 2.2.3 Problem with Presupposing Epistemic Target Object

After narrowing our focus to general wisdom in life issues and setting the standard for wise people's epistemic base as justified beliefs, it seems natural for us to take a step further and ask what exact content the epistemic target objects of the wise are supposed to contain. But is there a definitive answer to what this content should entail? As is noted by Whitcomb, one definition of wisdom considers it the essential belief or understanding of how to live well. However, with various belief systems about the good life, no belief or understanding seems to be able to definitively define living well.<sup>2</sup> We can easily imagine two persons being considered as wise: a hermit who advocates that we should pursue inner peace by meditation, and, in the meantime, a leading social activist who calls for changes and asks us to fight relentlessly for our future. It does not take much effort to see that their

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<sup>1</sup> This, once again, pertains to the epistemological tradition of valuing truth, which will be introduced in Chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> Whitcomb, "Wisdom," p. 98.



view of life is quite a contrast to the other's. The hermit might view everyday life as ephemeral, like dreams or illusions, while the activist places trust in tangible, real-life progress. If we are under the impression that the former view is more credible, then, any endeavor to mundane achievement will be rendered meaningless. On the contrary, if we find the latter stance more encouraging, then, the pursuit of tranquility of mind can somehow be interpreted as a kind of self-deception, for meditation has only trivial impact on the external world. However, both positions seem to make sense to some degree, and it is difficult to tell which one is wiser without strongly upholding only one of them.<sup>1</sup>

The mutual exclusivity of these views illustrates that while both may seem like plausible components of wise people's epistemic targets, neither offers a definitive answer to the question, "What beliefs are wise people supposed to possess?". In fact, even more opinions towards what counts as the good life can be found in the history: For example, Aristotle, Epicurus and the Stoics all chase some kind of cosmic order, but only Aristotle emphasizes reflection and inquiries in the process;<sup>2</sup> Christian theories of wisdom sometimes focusses solely on the guidance of God, sometimes not;<sup>3</sup> modern perspectives on wisdom may, though not invariably, link it with scientific understanding, contrasting with historical associations of wisdom with magic or mystical experiences.<sup>4</sup> Conflicting conceptions can be found throughout the history, and there seems to be no sign suggesting that consensus can be achieved. But without a consensus on the concept of living well, how can we establish a unified understanding of wisdom based on it?

This question seems to be related to the overarching concern about the normative generic use of wisdom raised in our review of empirical research of wisdom, regarding which philosophical studies were said to be potentially helpful. Unfortunately, here it seems that philosophical discussion of wisdom also has its own unification issue. In fact, some readers may have already noticed that this issue has somehow already manifested

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<sup>1</sup> This contrast will be further discussed in Section 3 with more details taken into account.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel N. Robinson, "Wisdom through the Ages," in *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University, 1990), pp. 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> Curnow, *Wisdom: A History*, p. 50.

itself in our previous discussion of the assumption of the basic meaning of wisdom. While our proposal may have more plausibility than Grimm's assumption highlighting wisdom's focal meaning by cutting off a controversial but not necessary debate over where the focal meaning is from, it does not solve the root cause of challenges against Grimm's account. One might still wonder why should we accept this seemingly not counter-intuition description of wisdom while we cannot be sure whether it is the whole picture of wisdom? Is stronger evidence needed to support this intuition about wisdom? Do we need a broadened discussion of how exactly "wisdom" functions in everyday context? These questions seem to prompt us to consider the validity of the claim made on the generic use of "wisdom." Considering this, it is not like any philosophical account would be helpful to solve our overarching worry as soon as it is introduced. There might be a deeper reason underneath the theoretical structure that these two approaches share that make them encounter the same difficulty.

That said, we will leave the general consideration of the overarching concern to Section 3, as some specific points emerging from our current discussion are also interesting enough to be discussed. To begin with, when "epistemic" target object is considered in its basic, conventional sense surrounding covert cognition, two concerns are already raised in this respect. First, commonsense suggests that a person is wise due to possessing certain beliefs (like deep understanding or knowledge) that confer wisdom. This implies that our typical method of validating wisdom relies on the "wise" quality of what wise individuals are presumed to possess. However, such a supporting factor of wisdom demands certain things that are difficult to be found from salient sources. As Daniel N. Robinson notes, to regard someone as wise is to take her as someone that has deep understanding of the reality, which, more or less, presumes something metaphysically. If metaphysics is considered in terms of ontology and epistemology, the concept of wisdom turns out to rely on the commitment to what is true in an ontologically correct sense and the commitment to people's ability to know about such truth.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Robinson seems to be pessimistic about setting such epistemic objectives. In his paper with Lisa M. Osbeck, they observe that:

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, "Wisdom through Ages," p. 22. We will see an argument based on considerations similar to these two about our overarching issue in Chapter 3.

At issue here are matters of critical concern, for two radically different worlds are envisaged by participants in this long debate. Just in case there is an *essential* human nature, able to be corrupted or refined by the larger cultural and civic dimensions of life, the task and very sign of “wisdom” is the identification of those foundational principles on which the right sort of life is to be based. On the contrary, just in case “wisdom” is but a code word for local, situated, contextually bounded agreements and conventions needed to preserve the physical and social integrity of a given community, the entire project of philosophy as originally conceived would be jejune.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, if “wisdom” is understood based on the presumption of universal human nature, then wisdom boils down to a right way to live, while if “wisdom” is merely understood parochially and specified contextually, a philosophical project of accounting for it will turn out to be naïvely simplistic. If we find neither the pursuit of one’s proper way of living nor the minimal valuation of philosophical research satisfying, then neither approach seems to lead to a credible definition of the epistemic target object for the wise, yet no alternative option is apparently available.

Second, if wisdom is primarily acknowledged through the attainment of specific epistemic target objects, there might be concerns about diminishing the agential aspect in this conception of wisdom. Following Richard Swinburne’s concern that placing the guarantee of knowledge external to the agent submerges the intrinsic value of the cognitive process — since, regardless of the quality of the epistemic process, its ultimate aim remains identical<sup>2</sup> — we might find similar worries in the context of wisdom, as the value of wisdom does not come fundamentally from the agents but those things that make the agents wise. It might be more counterintuitive for many to accept that wisdom is not intimately linked to a sage’s personal efforts, more so than in the case of knowledge. After all, wisdom is usually considered as a virtue that agents might possess and manifest, while knowledge is not. However, the presumption of specific epistemic target objects for the wise seems to inevitably lead to this issue.

While these two concerns are worth mentioning, addressing them may need to wait for the more general as well as more profound discussion of the normative generic concept of wisdom. This is due not only to their interconnectedness and the efficiency of addressing

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<sup>1</sup> Osbeck and Robinson, “Philosophical Theories of Wisdom,” p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 94.

related issues collectively, but also because contemporary literature has not yet sufficiently taken into account these underlying concerns to immediately aid our discussion at this point. However, before we delve into the overarching issue, recall that our use of “epistemic target object” is meant to cover more plausible considerations. It is important to note that beyond the mere covertly cognition of wisdom, corresponding practice to carry out what has been acquired is also typically expected for the wise. Therefore, we also need to look at plausible requirements made in respect with wisdom’s practical aspect.

### **2.3 Wisdom in Practice**

Regardless of whether the practical aspect of wisdom is viewed as an extension of, or an addition to, the covert epistemic process, it is common to find expectations that wise individuals will apply their insights in real-life contexts. Even in the fundamental conception of the wise as sources of life advice, there is an expectation to gain practical guidance for navigating our lives. As Grimm says: “[...] the point is that there is a kind of integration between thought and action that seems characteristic of wisdom, and that an adequate theory should try to capture.”<sup>1</sup> There are two key ideas implied in this anticipation for application: For one, wise individuals are expected to take action. This expectation goes beyond mere physical movement. It involves a conscious application of judgment in practice, but do not necessitate bodily movements (e.g., overt operations), as we can imagine a wise monk meditating all day without moving a bit, with his wisdom lying in her euthymia. For another, wise individuals are expected to act based on their understanding of the epistemic content contributing to their wisdom (which is gained through their epistemic characteristics). There is an expected intimate and mutually supportive relationship between one’s wise thoughts and deeds. If someone is doing something that wise individuals typically do without any trust in its effect of leading people to live a good life, then it seems ridiculous to expect her to thereby become truly wise. For example, mimicking meditation for amusement and achieving a peaceful, mindful state typically associated with wisdom does not intuitively justify ascribing wisdom, especially

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<sup>1</sup> Grimm, "Wisdom," p. 153.

if the intention behind the act lacks depth or sincerity. In the meantime, if an individual professes belief in a wise way of living and advocates for it, yet lacks self-control to live accordingly, it is difficult to credit her interpretation of wisdom either.

### 2.3.1 Requirements of Appreciation and Acceptance

There are several aspects to consider in between the intimate relationship between wise thoughts and wise actions, some of them might be arguably less typically considered under the topic of practice. For example, in the previous case of meditation, what immediately matters appears to be the agent's attitudes — it is because she does not genuinely value or desire this way of living (suppose that it is indeed a way leading to good life) she is not qualified as wise. This implicit expectation might be titled as the appreciation requirement for the wise. Nevertheless, this is at most a superficial level of expectation for a contender for the wise, as it is not even an issue just about wisdom — in any given topic, if one fails to align her intention with her action, her outcome would not be recognized as an appropriate outcome of that kind. But the concern is not solely intensified when the focus narrows to “wisdom” itself. Given the variety of epistemic content that could lead to wisdom, it's conceivable that one might appreciate certain types of wisdom while rejecting others. More concerning is the scenario where one fails to appreciate wisdom altogether — not recognizing the inherent value of the entire subject field to which wisdom belongs, which is now set as well-being. Sharon Ryan stresses that wise people should, in general, appreciate the true value of living well, though perhaps understandably without much argumentation.<sup>1</sup> However, Whitcomb tries to show that wisdom does not require appreciation of its content by two cases:

(i) Argument from depression:

Consider a wise person who knows how to live well and values and desires the good life. Suppose that at some point in this person's life, he is beset by a fit of deep depression due to a medication he had to take to cure an otherwise terminal

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Ryan, "What Is Wisdom," p. 135; "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," p. 103.

illness. It seems unfair to this person to say that his medication destroys his wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

(ii) Argument from evil:

Consider Mephistopheles, that devil to whom Faust foolishly sells his soul. Mephistopheles knows what advice will bring Faust to lead a bad life, and that is precisely the advice that he gives him. But then, it stands to reason that Mephistopheles also knows what advice will bring Faust to lead a *good* life. So, it stands to reason that Mephistopheles knows how to live well. Despite this knowledge, the life Mephistopheles lives is bad, and so is the life he brings Faust to live. Mephistopheles is sinister, fiendish, and wicked. But whatever he is, he is not a fool. He is, it seems, wise but evil.<sup>2</sup>

With these two cases, Whitcomb wants to distinguish between wise people's epistemic state and their conative state and argues that one's level of wisdom can be evaluated solely from the former aspect. Nevertheless, the examples utilized here may not be as persuasive as Whitcomb thinks. In the first case, Whitcomb fails to take the extent of the agent's depression into account. If her depression comes to the degree that she can no longer perform any actions, then, no matter how much epistemic content she owns, no matter how many life lessons we can learn from her, it is difficult to relate her possession of information to the attainment of wisdom, for physical capability is an indispensable part of an agent, and without such capacity one cannot be regarded as a paradigmatic human being, let alone a candidate for the wise. Though it may sound cruel, someone without her ability to act at all is akin to a machine, and we can hardly envisage a "wise" computer being admired by human beings, despite the fact that it stores millions of idioms associated with wisdom, or it is able to provide sensible decisions for life problems by refined calculation. And, thus, it makes little sense to discuss "wisdom" if the agent is depressed to such a severe extent. On the other hand, if her depression does not fully affect her volition, we will have every reason to believe that she would try her best to live well, to the degree that she is able to will. Only when similar attempt exists, can we possibly think of her as a wise person; otherwise, her action will be against her own "wisdom." And since

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<sup>1</sup> Whitcomb, "Wisdom," p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 97-98.

this person is trying to live well under such difficult circumstances, it is hard to see why she does not appreciate the value of living well.

The second argument, on the other hand, does not appear to be effective. In this case, it seems that Whitcomb mixes up two different views of living-well from two different perspectives. We do not pursue a way of living if we do not think it is worth living, and it is difficult to see why this is not the case for demons, even if we do not merely consider them in light of anthropomorphism. Demons may chase a lifestyle that does no good to human beings, or even worse, a lifestyle that is bad for every kind of being (e.g., taking a highway to hell, which is by definition a bad destination). Nevertheless, for demons themselves, this way of living can be enjoyable in its own way, whether being sympathized by human beings or not. If our judgment about the value of their pursuit has no essential influence on their point of view, however Whitcomb persuades us that demons are leading a life that one should not desire, his conclusion has no direct impact on demons' appreciation of their choice, and his argumentation thus misfires.

While Whitcomb's arguments may appear unconvincing, an alternative concern might cast doubt on the appreciation requirement, emphasizing the depreciation of sensible practical decisions. For instance, excessive sugar intake is harmful to health, but consuming sugar can also bring happiness. Imagine someone who is sad and needs sugar to brighten her mood, yet she insists on not relying on an extra amount of sugar. It should be plausible enough to see this decision as wise, even though she cannot appreciate this choice emotionally at the very moment. Thus, judging wisely does not seem to require the agent's appreciation of her choice. The problem with this kind of argument is that it conflates appreciating a single choice with appreciating living a generally good life. The fact that this person prefers her well-being than transient happiness actually illustrates that she understands and desires what is more important for her to live well, and this is exactly the spirit of the appreciation condition. Moreover, what is more prominent in this scenario is another attitude that naturally stems from one's appreciation that sets the general goal, which features respect, acceptance, and obedience to conclusions that align with one's greater purpose. While wise individuals generally appreciate living well, which motivates them to accept and follow their practical inferences, they may not always feel happy with each of their wise decisions. A famous example in this regard is Plato's depiction of

philosophers who, despite their preference for pursuing truth over governing, are compelled by their understanding of the highest good to lead their fellow citizens towards a just society and happiness.<sup>1</sup> In this case, a philosopher-king acts against personal interest to follow the path of the greater good.<sup>2</sup> This decision, though not immediately gratifying from an ordinary perspective, ultimately aligns with what the wise truly value. Hence, immediate dissatisfaction does not undermine the appreciation or the subsequent acceptance requirements.

### 2.3.2 Requirement of Application

If wise individuals are typically expected to appreciate the value of their wisdom (or more specifically, the value of what their wisdom concerns) and accept what their practical reasoning dictates, then this naturally leads to an expectation for these wise judgments to generate corresponding dispositions and thereby be applied in practice. This seems to be so self-evident and is implied even by those accounts of wisdom that do not explicitly require actions in accordance with the epistemic content contributing to one's wisdom. For instance, Grimm proposes that there are, at least, three necessary conditions for wisdom:

- (1) Knowledge of what is good or important for well-being.
- (2) Knowledge of one's standing, relative to what is good or important for well-being.
- (3) Knowledge of a strategy for obtaining what is good or important for well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Grimm's account is not intended to be exhaustive, and thus leaves room for other conditions,<sup>4</sup> which include an extra condition of the application of knowledge. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, "Republic," Book VII, 520.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas White, "The Ruler's Choice," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 68, no. 1 (1986): p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Grimm, "Wisdom," p. 140.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.



he later clarifies that he is not dismissing the application requirement, but his conception of the kind of knowledge required by wisdom is a strong state of knowledge that already integrates one's thought, desire, and action.<sup>1</sup> In any case, his consideration at this point clearly implies the requirement for wise people to act according to their judgments. Consider his own case when he discusses the second condition:

Suppose Smith believes correctly, let us assume that having a loving respectful relationship with his spouse is important to his well-being. But he also believes incorrectly that he already possesses this good, unaware that his selfish behaviour has been eroding his marriage for years. He therefore makes no effort to improve his relationship and he continues to move farther away from, rather than closer to, what he acknowledges as important. When we learn this, then far from being wise Smith begins to seem like a clear case of a fool.<sup>2</sup>

In Grimm's view, Smith correctly believes that a healthy relationship contributes significantly to happiness. Unfortunately, he mistakenly believes he has achieved this ideal, contrasting his theoretical understanding with the reality of his situation, which turns out to make him unwise. In other words, Grimm assumes that wise people must know whether their reality matches their plans made in light of their idea of good, which only makes sense when the application requirement is at play, as there is simply no practical results to be examined if there is no action in advance, and the agent certainly cannot meet the criteria set by the second condition without her deeds.

The intuitive appeal of the application requirement becomes clearer when considering wisdom within the bigger landscape of virtues. An analogy can be drawn from Michael Slote's characterization of empathy, which incorporates Wang Yangming's theory of knowledge and action. Slote identifies four aspects of compassion: (i) feeling (ii) emotion (iii) motivation for action, and (iv) sympathy for others' distress, coupled with the will to help others find relief. He describes one's receptivity of information from the external world as "Yin" and one's corresponding reaction as "Yang," arguing that these are complementary and necessary for each other. Put another way, as long as one is in a state of compassion, one's reception and reaction are two sides of the same process,

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<sup>1</sup> Grimm, "Wisdom in Theology," p. 199.

<sup>2</sup> "Wisdom," p. 145.

encompassing all four aspects of this virtue.<sup>1</sup> This “Yin” and “Yang” analogy, when adapted, also sheds light on understanding the simultaneity of acquiring wise judgments and the disposition to act accordingly.

In addition to its intuitive appeal, the application condition serves a vital linking function. Even if Smith achieves his desired state, namely, a healthy marital relationship, this state can only be considered as a manifestation of his wisdom when it is properly connected to his epistemic and conative states. For example, individuals who memorize ethical principles but never apply them are not seen as moral agents, as their actions, even when conforming to moral standards, are not driven by their good will. Therefore, this evaluation must consider a continuous stream of thought and action, where dispositions are essential to connect them.

The debate over dispositions arises in whether wisdom necessitates translating these dispositions into concrete actions. Philosophers like John Kekes argue that wise people should practice their wisdom,<sup>2</sup> while others like Whitcomb<sup>3</sup> and Garrett<sup>4</sup> contend that wisdom does not require action. The issue is not whether dispositions manifest in actions under appropriate conditions, but whether wise individuals are required to manifest them in actions beyond merely possessing the dispositions. In ordinary situations, contrasting these views may not be necessary. However, in certain less ordinary situations, unexpected factors may intervene in executing these dispositions. At this juncture, it is useful to distinguish between two relevant concerns. First, one might wonder how one can meet the application requirement in rare scenarios, such as agents encountering unusual physical limitations or other uncommon challenges. This does not seem to be inherently problematic, as a wise person can act out their disposition in unique ways, which aligns with the intuitive expectation for wisdom to adapt even in abnormal circumstances. Second, compared to the former scenario where the way one acts is affected, more radical cases,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Slote, *A Larger Yin/Yang Philosophy: From Mind to Cosmic Harmony* (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Kekes, "Wisdom."

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, his argument from depression in the last sub-subsection.

<sup>4</sup> "Wisdom is that understanding and those justified beliefs which are essential to living the best life." Garrett, "Three Definitions of Wisdom," p. 230.

especially those far removed from everyday contexts, might impact the process of action itself. This concern warrants further discussion in the next sub-subsection, which will focus on how external factors can interfere with one's actions. Therefore, this section concludes with a mere emphasis on application to the extent of generating corresponding dispositions.

### 2.3.3 Requirement of Outcome

It is evident that an agent's disposition to act does not always result in practical success. While what is typically concerned in this phenomenon is the phase of actions leading to results, for our current purposes, it might be beneficial to also consider the phase of intentions leading to actions. This should not be too difficult to accept, as the basic concern is the failure to reach intended outcomes. If we consider actions as intermediary intended outcomes of intentions, it makes sense to broaden our understanding in this way. The reason for this broader interpretation is that the third consideration regarding the practical aspect of wisdom that we need to take into account essentially centers around this disconnect. While it is common for ordinary people to fail to achieve their intended outcomes through actions, wise people seem to be typically expected to succeed, whether in the disposition-action phase or the action-result phase. In any case, the discussion in this sub-subsection will cover both phases, regardless of the specific terminology.

The most contentious part of this question is perhaps whether wise people's actions should be verified by their success in achieving their aims. Philosophers may hold diverse opinions on this, but they can be roughly grouped into two opposing views: First, they may object this potential requirement. For example, Sharon Ryan argues that wise people must live rationally but need not necessarily live well in real life, and Robert Nozick puts emphasis only on the exertion of wisdom in shaping oneself and one's own life, without further consideration of the actual results.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, some philosophers may insist on this requirement. For example, Valerie Tiberius & Jason Swartwood assert that wise people should live a good life. Aristotle claims that "the truth in practical matters is

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Nozick, "What is Wisdom and Why do Philosophers Love it So?," in *The Examined Life* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1989).

discerned from the facts of life.”<sup>1</sup> Grimm also maintains that wise people “learn from experience what is good or important for well-being” and “what is more or less important for well-being.”<sup>2</sup> These contrasting viewpoints are complex, as both enjoy reasonable support. On the one hand, wise individuals, being human, share the human trait of fallibility and may fail to achieve their aims. On the other hand, wisdom is closely associated with a propensity for successful outcomes; otherwise, seeking guidance from the wise would make no sense. Some might argue that wisdom inherently entails success. However, in extremely abnormal situations, wise individuals may be unable to succeed due to factors beyond their control and not attributable to their fault. Consider the following case:

Imagine a person with the most reliable beliefs, considered wise under normal circumstances. Since her beliefs are reliable, her choices and actions based on these beliefs should also reliably bring about expected results. However, unknown to her, an evil scientist intentionally thwarts her success with unforeseeable hindrances, making it impossible for her to demonstrate her wisdom through practice. Yet, it seems unreasonable to deem her unwise due to this extreme situation.<sup>3</sup>

One solution to this dilemma is to reconsider our understanding of “reliable.” When we consider wise people’s thoughts as reliable, we expect actions based on them to reliably lead to anticipated outcomes. This means that generally, those possessing wisdom, when applying their epistemic content to real life, can succeed in achieving their goals. But the interpretation of “in general” varies:

(i) “In general” could mean “most of the time.” This suggests that wise people are supposed to be reliable more often than not, but not always. The idea that wise people should always be right and succeed is not only implausible due to human fallibility, but also because an infallibilist account of wisdom cannot explain how come an unwise person can become wise and a wise person can become unwise. The process of transformation is intuitively understandable since human beings develop their cognitive ability as experience

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, Digital ed., vol. 1 & 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3995/1179a17.

<sup>2</sup> Grimm, “Wisdom,” p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Michael Slote for bringing up this case during our discussion.

grows, and lose it because of unavoidable senescence. This is further confirmed by contemporary research which shows that it is possible for wise people to lose their wisdom, and to realize that they themselves have made mistakes in the past.<sup>1</sup> That said, we do tend to believe that wise people's actions should stably produce desired outcomes. Therefore, to fairly judge how reliable an agent is, her practical outcomes should be considered across her entire lifespan, with the end of life as the final checkpoint for wisdom. A wise person might be wise at one moment but not at another. We can evaluate how wise she is in different periods and the trends in her level of wisdom. But ultimately, one's general state of being wise should be examined at life's end, taking the entirety of her life into account.

(ii) "In general" can also mean "principally." This is particularly noticeable when wisdom is considered as a general state that integrates various aspects, or more specifically, a virtue that synthesizes multiple virtues. As Slote observes, not all virtues coexist harmoniously. For example, frankness is clearly in conflict with tactfulness. This makes it impossible for a person to be perfectly virtuous, as long as one's virtues are examined as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Of course, one might argue against this idea by suggesting that an agent can effectively "combine" her virtues instead of "uniting" them to achieve an ethically ideal state. However, as Slote elaborates, the inherent conflict among various virtues introduces a space for ethical critique, implying that an agent cannot be deemed perfectly admirable.<sup>3</sup> In simpler terms, a virtue's perfection is always compromised when considered alongside other virtues. Thus, wisdom, implying the cooperation of different virtues, can never reach perfection. That is to say, a wise person, even when she exerts all her capabilities as expected, can at most be principally, rather than perfectly, virtuous.

(iii) The third possibility is that wise people are only generally reliable due to practical concerns. To illustrate, consider Jackie, a novice who has prepared plans for various potential work situations. She has devised almost every solution that could be used for her job. While we may regard her choice as wise for a rookie, her reliability as a wise

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., J. Meacham, "The Loss of Wisdom," in *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Slote, *The Impossibility of Perfection: Aristotle, Feminism, and the Complexities of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 31, 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

person in her job is still questionable. After all, there are always unforeseeable emergencies that her plans might not cover.<sup>1</sup> An underlying intuition here is that wise people can solve unforeseen issues. This is often highlighted in ancient stories about wisdom, where it is associated with seer-like powers and abilities, such as warning the presence of danger in advance.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this should not be misinterpreted as an expectation for the wise to have a plan for every single possibility. For example, Sharon Ryan contends that wisdom involves having “a rational plan for all sorts of situations and problems,”<sup>3</sup> which could be not only overly demanding for humanly conception of wisdom, but also unnecessary, as wise people are also expected to improvise occasionally. If one always has a plan, it is hard to see how she can also exhibit characteristics like quick-wittedness, another trait associable with wisdom. But what might such improvisation look like? Continuing with Jackie: As she gains more experience, she becomes adept at adapting her plans to new requirements. Eventually, she faces an unprecedented situation requiring an immediate decision. Relying on her experience, she makes the right call, and her colleagues agree that her choice is wise.

At the moment Jackie makes her decision, her wisdom concerning her work should be acknowledged. However, when we delve deeper into the details of this moment, we might wonder if her decision is perfect. This is a controversial topic. If “perfect” means the most proficient solution in theory, then it is almost impossible for Jackie’s decision to meet this standard, since the amount of information that she is able to collect during that very limited time is unlikely to be ideal. Nevertheless, it does not seem quite accurate to deem Jackie’s wise decision as “imperfect” either. A key aspect that might be overlooked but needs to be emphasized in this case is timeliness. Wise individuals are expected to make sound choices for themselves and those who seek their advice. In urgent situations, they must respond promptly, based on the information at hand. Decisions made under such circumstances may not be perfect when all things considered. Yet, in such scenarios, opting

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<sup>1</sup> This might pertain to another intuition: in certain unanticipated situations, we often expect them to be addressed with experience, something that Jackie lacks..

<sup>2</sup> Curnow, *Wisdom: A History*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," p. 108. Note that Sharon Ryan is talking about wisdom in the context of “what really matters” (2012 108), whereas in this instance, “wisdom” is used in the context of Jackie’s work. This distinction, however, does not essentially affect the argument.

for a less than ideal, but timely decision is in fact the wise course of action. In this sense, wise individuals can be merely generally reliable considering their practical constraints.

As Valerie Tiberius notes, while wise people sometimes produce wise judgments by reflection, intuition is also used from time to time, and the choice is made depending on the situation.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Lisa Brotolotti emphasizes the role that intuition plays in a wise strategy, and she argues that “we need both reflective and intuitive processes for good decision-making.”<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum’s analysis of Aristotle also suggests that an agent is supposed to become practically wise by developing her speed in strategizing and decision-making.<sup>3</sup> These discussions underscore the importance of timely responses to practical requirements, which may not always be perfect, but remain sensible.

(iv) The abovementioned interpretations of “in general” are helpful for us to understand wisdom, especially when it is conceived as human wisdom. However, they do not directly address the dilemma of wise individuals in hostile environments, like the evil scientist scenario, where unforeseeable factors are created to intervene in the execution of wise thoughts. In such cases, wisdom is not effective “in general” because it is not manifested at all. Nonetheless, we might still sympathize with the wise for their bad luck, which seems to suggest that we still recognize some form of retained wisdom. This intuition might not be easily explained when focusing solely on the main character in question.<sup>4</sup> However, it becomes more comprehensible when we consider a fourth interpretation of wisdom’s reliability — that wisdom might be generally applicable without being tied to a specific person. Indeed, even if a wise individual fails due to unusual circumstances, her judgments are still expected to be effective in ordinary settings. This

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Tiberius, *The Reflective Life: Living Wisely With Our Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Brotolotti, "Does Reflection Lead to Wise Choices?," *Philosophical Explorations* 14, no. 3 (2011): p. 310, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2011.594962>.

<sup>3</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 305.

<sup>4</sup> An alternative interpretation of this situation will be proposed in Chapter 5 when we revisit these requirements.

implies that wise actions can be evaluated independently for their wisdom.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, when we require wisdom to be reliable, we might alternatively look for wise judgments, decisions or plans that reliably produce anticipated results in common situations, irrespective of their proposers or possessors' personal success in implementation. With the general applicability of their wise epistemic outcomes taken into account, epistemic agents can still be regarded as wise in abnormal situations. In this context, there is no need to further require wise individuals to succeed in carrying out practical actions and achieve outcomes corresponding to their possession of dispositions. Since the requirement for the wise can be limited to their dispositions to apply their wise epistemic content, the disposition-action-outcome rupture issue is also resolved.

These four interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Wise individuals can be generally reliable as they respond in a timely and reasonably acceptable manner most of the time, providing judgments applicable in similar situations under normal circumstances. This broadened understanding might suggest a rejection of the form commonly used in contemporary epistemological definitions, which, when used on wisdom, goes as: “*S* is wise, if and only if at time *t*...”. The reason is that this starting point is ambiguous in discussions of wisdom, as an agent can be wise generally or just momentarily. In the latter case, the agent is not genuinely wise in a commonsense way but merely manifests something pertinent to genuine wisdom in that position, thus holding less theoretical value. The lack of clarification on this point might lead to confusion. For example, the condition “at time *t*” appears in Sharon Ryan’s early theory of wisdom but is later omitted without much explanation.<sup>2</sup> This puzzling situation persists as other philosophers respond to her

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<sup>1</sup> This point can be understood the other way around, as “[t]hroughout human history the wise saying seems to seek a wise person to which to attach itself.” (Curnow, *Wisdom: A History*.) This implies that people tend to attribute wise judgments to recognized wise figures, irrespective of whether the latter indeed produced the former. Such a phenomenon relates to a way of thinking that might be easily accepted in epistemology and thus does not need to be stated specifically: wisdom is primarily conceptualized centered on wise individuals, just like knowledge, understanding, and many other significant epistemological concepts. In any case, what is more important to note here is that judgments can be evaluated whether they are wise or not independently of their origin, since their producers’ identities are irrelevant in this context.

<sup>2</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," p. 108; "Deeper Defense," p. 117.



theory, some including this condition in their discussions,<sup>1</sup> others not.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, the popularity of this approach may stem from the mainstream treatment of knowledge as single propositional knowledge. In contrast, wisdom studies focus more on a general state of cognition, which can be understood from at least the four aspects listed above. Therefore, applying the same treatment to the concept of wisdom might be too limiting.

What we primarily learn from this section is that there are various plausible expectations for the wise in an epistemological context. They can be categorized by their association with three main aspects of our epistemic process: epistemic characteristics (such as epistemic accuracy, humility, prudence, etc.), epistemic target objects (certain justified beliefs in general life issues and more specific domains gained through anticipated epistemic characteristics), and corresponding practice (appreciating the value of wisdom's subject field, accepting practical inferential results under wisdom's guidance, and dispositions to apply the target objects of covert epistemic processes in real life). These expectations seem to constitute a basic framework of plausible requirements for the wise that an adequate theory of wisdom should reflect. Nevertheless, they are not without their potential issues. Challenges to this framework might focus on specific points, such as presupposing an epistemic target object (the issues of consensus on living well, and the lack of emphasis on wisdom's agential facet), or on the broader consideration of wisdom as a provisional substitute for guiding principles in fields lacking definitive highest principles (with unqualified wisdom primarily understood in terms of life, thereby deriving domain-specific wisdom by analogy). The questioning of these requirements' validity can be furthered, leading one to ask why these expectations should constitute any "requirement" at all — why should they be characterized as having any normative force on our conception of wisdom? Once again, the concern about the normative generic concept of wisdom emerges, suggesting that this might need to be addressed before we proceed to the next step of theorizing wisdom based on this basic framework.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Shane Ryan, "Wisdom: Understanding and the Good Life," *Acta Analytica* 31 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-015-0278-4>.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Fileva and Tresan, "Wisdom Beyond Rationality."

### 3. Normative Generic Concept of Wisdom and Truth Condition Question

The remaining question of Section 2 brings us back to the concern about the normative generic concept of wisdom, now viewed through an epistemological lens. This concern can be interpreted on two levels: On a more superficial level, although Section 2 preliminarily presents a basic framework of plausible requirements for the wise, serving as a reasonable starting point for wisdom theorization, it can be anticipated that some readers might find the tentative conclusion unsatisfactory. After all, wisdom, though universally praised, is also known for its varied definitions across different narratives. Our previous list covers many features typically associated with wisdom, yet a brief review of some prominent figures representing wisdom (particularly those from ancient mythologies) will reveal that there are still other features not included, some even being difficult to integrate into a modern understanding of wisdom, such as founding civilization, creating language, and possessing magical power.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, even though we have developed a framework based on common expectations, it might still fail to encompass every essential aspect of wisdom that we intuitively find appealing. That said, just as in the case of empirical research, although this issue is challenging, it is not insurmountable, especially with the clear objective of establishing a foundation for further exploration of wisdom. By considering a sufficiently broad range of wisdom theories, it is feasible in principle to enhance our framework and develop a comprehensive model of wisdom.<sup>2</sup> The goal can be set as finding where different viewpoints overlap and advancing our understanding of wisdom from this common ground. For example, a prevalent wisdom theory might view (practical) wisdom as a skill in living well, suggesting that a wise person knows certain things and reliably lives well due to such knowledge.<sup>3</sup> While this view might meet only the

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<sup>1</sup> Curnow, *Wisdom: A History*, pp. 14-15, 23, 41, passim. A very interesting point to note here is that this connection between wisdom and groundbreaking creation is seldom brought up in contemporary epistemological literature about wisdom, except for Yu, "Three Kinds of Wisdom."

<sup>2</sup> Possible methodologies behind this process might involve a form of reflective equilibrium, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> Tsai, *Wisdom: A Skill Theory*.

minimal expectation for wisdom,<sup>1</sup> it still shares common elements related to skill and well-being with other theories, which can be further explored within our proposed framework.

More troubling than this superficial diversity is the challenge posed by the diverse instances of recognized wise individuals, with some cases not easily fitting into a shared framework. The overlap among various expectations for the wise does not imply that potentially conflicting views of wisdom will be perfectly reconciled within a theoretical framework. This is not a new issue if readers still remember what raised the normative concerns in the discussion of empirical research limitations — the potential conflicts between diverse perspectives. Although philosophical studies are usually more adept at handling such issues, merely listing plausible requirements for the wise does not seem to address the problem. A notable example is the conflict between divine wisdom and human wisdom. Many traditions hold that wisdom is ultimately divine, as echoed in Socrates's view that human wisdom cannot compare to divine wisdom. If the concept of divine wisdom is taken into account, human wisdom might not seem to be worth discussing at all.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, one might argue that divine wisdom, despite its intuitive appeal to many, can be sensibly excluded from our current discussion, as it offers little useful information for human practice, thus avoiding this potential contention. Nevertheless, even within the realm of human wisdom, contradictions still arise, as illustrated by the following cases (which were briefly introduced earlier in Sub-subsection 2.2.3). The first case is about a wise individual applying her wisdom to address public concerns:

**Political and Social Leader:** A wise individual can serve as a political and social leader, providing helpful advice for the development of society, tactfully uniting the masses, and shaping the community towards a better state. This could involve advocating for certain ideas, establishing specific institutions or systems, or implementing impactful laws. She could be the actual ruler of her state, an organizer in her community, a judicial reformer, an environmental advocate, a social activist, etc. Regardless of the role, under her

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<sup>1</sup> Curnow, *Wisdom: A History*, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, "Apology," 23a-b.

leadership or influence, the community is considered to be progressing significantly due to her endeavors or contributions.

Note that this case is not about someone being wise solely in the field of public affairs, irrespective of whether others judge her as wise based on her deeds in this area. It also does not imply that a wise individual must contribute to her community or cannot bring benefits in other ways. What is suggested here is merely that when a wise person serves as a political or social leader, they are typically expected to be capable of these achievements. For our current purposes, what warrants special attention is that such commonsensical anticipation implies a degree of social involvement: To lead society in a specific direction, the individual usually needs to engage in social interactions, often within a particular group, thereby organizing large-scale activities or movements towards a specific goal. It is difficult to see how a wise individual, despite her wisdom, could maintain a stable and efficient connection with her community and realize her vision for its good without this involvement. Even the most recognized wise leaders need disciples to help with daily life, transmit wise thoughts, and carry out ideas on a larger scale. Therefore, a wise political or social leader is likely to be actively involved in a social movement. In other words, a wise individual, when engaging in social activities, her social involvement is sensible and does not diminish her wisdom.

However, at this juncture, some readers may recall that wise people are also often characterized as avoiding involvement in the public sphere. For one, wise people are, by definition, extraordinary, especially intellectually, making it understandable that they might not want to be trapped in less intellectually stimulating discussions. For another, wise people are often consulted for important decisions. Thus, when they engage in social activities, it is unlikely they would not take on a significant or leadership role. Yet, this also suggests that they cannot merely offer occasional advice; they are likely to be expected to contribute more substantially, which could result in sacrificing their personal time and space for the cause they are involved in. This makes it even more understandable why they might not be inclined to involve themselves, considering such foreseeable responsibility or burden. As the famous allegory about the sailors and the captain in the *Republic* suggests,

it is for those who need to be ruled to seek out those who can rule, not the reverse.<sup>1</sup> The important point to note here is not the self-sacrifice of the wise who choose to rule, but the conceivability and acceptability of a contrasting case like the following:

**Hermit:** A wise individual may choose to be a hermit, living a reclusive life away from the masses. Traditionally, this might mean being an ascetic or monk pursuing a religious or transcendental life. However, more broadly, it could merely mean being a bohemian or nonconformist, leading an unconventional life. The essence of this choice is a life not advocated or accepted by society in general, mainly due to the lack of social connection with the community or even her family.

“Hermit” might not be the most suitable term in this context, as it often implies a reclusive life centered around spiritual pursuits. While this aspect is relevant to our discussion, it is not a defining characteristic of all instances under consideration. An example of non-typical hermits might be the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (zhulin qixian, “竹林七贤”) in Chinese history.<sup>2</sup> This is a group of scholars or intellectuals (and often poets or musicians) living during the late Wei to early Jin period (3rd to 4th century AD). The life they lead, as depicted in popular stories, is considered reclusive since it typically excludes those outside their group. More importantly, they do not get involved in the public life or respond to the call from the court, which is conventionally thought of as responsibilities of the intellectuals.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they are believed to be more interested, or even indulged, in activities like composing poems, drinking alcohol, and discussing philosophy. Such an eccentric lifestyle is not usually associated with hermits pursuing spiritual practice, as this lifestyle deviates significantly from abstinence. Yet, it still gives people the impression that they refuse to cooperate with the institution or be bothered by

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<sup>1</sup> "Republic," Book VI, 488a-89d.

<sup>2</sup> They are Ji Kang (“嵇康”), Ruan Ji (“阮籍”), Shan Tao (“山涛”), Xiang Xiu (“向秀”), Liu Ling (“刘伶”), Wang Rong (“王戎”), and Ruan Xian (“阮咸”). “Seven Sages” may also be translated as “Seven Worthies.” However, for our current illustrative purpose, using “sages,” which is more often related to wise individuals, might better facilitate our understanding. For more relevant discussion, see, for example, Alan Chan, “Neo-Daoism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2019 Edition, 2019). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/neo-daoism/>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Curnow, *Wisdom: A History*, pp. 52-54.

the general public, as they have seen through the hypocrisy of the court or even the mundane world. They are thus frequently characterized as hermits enjoying a certain level of wisdom, regardless of the actual history behind the tale. Therefore, whether typical or non-typical, the hermit case presents a contrast to the public and social leader case, specifically regarding the engagement in public activities.

The benefit of using “hermit” here is that it intuitively introduces an “extreme” instance of the case (we will see what “extreme” means exactly shortly), which may most effectively illustrate the conflict that we try to highlight. Hermits are typically characterized by solitary living for religious or spiritual reasons. When taken to an extreme, this pursuit may inherently negate the value of a mundane lifestyle. Therefore, a hermit, in a radicalized scenario, may not only lead a way of living that is alternative to common lifestyle, but one that is essentially contrary to the latter. In fact, this kind of scenario is not limited to hermits that live in solitude. It is not difficult to find examples of religious advocacy in the midst of where crowds gather, arguing that the world in front of our eyes is of but an illusionary nature, and only through certain spiritual practice that they embrace can we see through the obstacle and contact what is genuinely valuable and worth pursuing. This kind of advocacy promotes an unconventional view of world and values, clashes with certain aspects of the common way in which we plan for a good life, and sometimes does lead to more considerable dispute or even armed conflict between groups holding differed beliefs. When this kind of thought is radicalized, it can result in or be associated with an extreme form of hermit-like existence as described (though it might ironically appear less extreme compared to certain worldly excesses). The key point here is less about the specific content of any tenet or the consequence that such advocacy brings into real life. What merits attention is merely the possibility of a hermit character who systematically negates the conventional understanding of a good life. Using “negate” in this context might initially sound a bit plain or dull. However, considering that hermits are often (though not necessarily) associated with not just reclusive and ascetic living, but also abstemious and abstinent habits, terms such as “reject,” “despise,” or “detest” may be overly emotive for describing them. In any case, what is most crucial to note is that, despite holding a negative attitude towards the mundane world, she is still considered wise by many. Implying such

an extreme instance, the hermit scenario fundamentally contradicts the political and social leader scenario, as the latter typically involves worldly engagement.

That said, while it is intuitive to steer the discussion in this direction, it seems the emphasis might have been misplaced. Our current narrative focuses on intensifying a specific negative attitude within the hermit case, thereby radicalizing it. In other words, the extremity of the instance stems from radicalizing a common feature of such a character. Yet, the main function of the extreme hermit instance seems is exposing a direct contradiction between the two cases. Negating a worldview typically entails denying a comprehensive belief system. In an intellectualized understanding of such systems, negation essentially concerns denying one or some central or foundational propositions held in a system of beliefs about the world, which includes views about one's own life and one's expectation for a good life. But does this denial (namely, a radical negation) render the instance adequately "extreme," especially considering that the objective is to reveal the underlying concern of the conflict? The answer appears to be negative on two fronts: this may not be the starting point for envisioning such an extreme, nor the most extreme example of its kind.

Considering again the more moderate instance of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove: First, let us look at how they turn against worldly expectation and pursue their reclusive life in the tale. What they purportedly turn away from is the traditionally received path for intellectuals, which emphasizes the importance of engaging with political affairs and adhering to or at least cooperating with the court. Conversely, "they collectively exemplified a kind of playful life that contrasted sharply with the expectations of the world they had left behind."<sup>1</sup> In doing so, they place greater value on pursuing spontaneity over the traditional intellectual career path, if not simply rejecting the latter. It is difficult to tell how determinedly and to which extent these seven sages downgrade the received values in the background, but this is not because that we cannot access the actual history and ascertain their actual thoughts. Rather, even within the scope of storytelling, interpretations can range from seeing their attitudes as suspending judgment to outright negation. Furthermore, one might soon realize that the exact interpretation to adopt does not truly

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

matter here — whichever interpretation is adopted, it does not affect the “fact” that they turn away from the worldly anticipation and lead an idiosyncratic lifestyle.

This is the first aspect of the crux of using the seven sages for illustration. The point is that what marks their leaving the “world” is the practice of choosing another path, rather than an explicit denial. This practice may be accompanied by various non-conformist attitudes, with “negation” potentially at one extreme. Nonetheless, regardless of the attitude the sages choose, as soon as they embark on their unique path, they effectively leave the ordinary path, which essentially amounts to a practical “negation.” The reason is simply that as long as these sages are still not capable of controlling time, which is usually not taken into account in the scope of human wisdom, they cannot simultaneously lead two ways of living. The sages’ negative perception of convention can, of course, stem from reflection on the weaknesses of their original belief system. However, it can also arise from a distinct perspective, which already implies “negation” in practice. That is to say, in this scenario, the sages’ practical conversion can be prior to holding a negative attitude, including less intensive feelings like disliking, suspending, rejecting, etc.<sup>1</sup> Thus, if it is “negation” itself (or, for clarity, a capitalized broader NEGATION) that is considered as the extreme, then this extreme of the spectrum does not necessarily begin with the shade of a more explicitly pronounced “negation” that the instance under discussion initially appears to stress on, but with the practical transition from the ordinary lifestyle to a new one that leads to wisdom. In short, hermits’ radical negation of the foundational proposition(s) of a worldly belief system might not serve as the entry point of the radical conflict conceived in terms of negation.

Second, citing the seven sages’ instance can also show that negation may not represent the ultimate extreme within the context of negation. When we focus on a range of negative attitudes, outright denial might seem to be the harshest and thus at the end of such a list. However, if we consider the broader process of wise people shifting from ordinary to unusual practice, the set of attitudes itself may not be at the concluding point

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<sup>1</sup> However, whether it is always the case that one’s practical negation demarcates two ways of living remains debatable. Considering the tricky counterexamples against the requirement for wise individual’s practical success, this dissertation will propose a rather reserved solution in this regard in Chapter 5, which will effectively suggest that the demarcation might not be manifested through actual practice. Nevertheless, this issue may warrant still further discussion.



of the entire process, hence neither is the negation as an element contained in it. In religious or spiritual contexts, an alternative or even replacement worldview is often introduced connecting to certain other-worldly experience. Here, “other-worldly” is a vivid expression somehow reflecting the mental journey of converting from the ordinary perspective to what the practitioners claim as “extraordinary” perspectives. In both moderate and extreme instances, the negative perception of everyday experience involves not just critique or negation of the average view but also its being overshadowed by an alternative experiential set. These experiences are often described as an addition to or as being attained based on ordinary perception (possibly because a completely separable, extraordinary experience is too challenging to conceptualize). Consequently, ordinary perception is reevaluated, seen as just a less significant part or an instrumental process leading to a more comprehensive, truth-revealing, and superior experience. For example, in spiritual exercise, ordinary perception is often deemed illusionary and obstructive. To have a tangible contact with the world as it truly is, one must get over the barrier and step outside the confinement set by the received conception of the world, which is done through a special set of training and rituals. As such, this kind of experience is inherently defined by its revelation of another, and “truer” world.

The notion of truer perception is also frequently associated with the concept of “wisdom.”<sup>1</sup> It seems that we can see more clearly why such conceptual connection (regardless of its strength) is appealing in light of our current exploration. When the seven sages embark on their non-conformist pursuit, what is pivotal in their story is not highlighting the flaws in the conventional lifestyle, but the unveiling of a new landscape. In fact, they do not even need to intentionally hint at the potential defects of the ordinary world view, their new way of living effectively suggests a critical reflection on what we take for granted. As Trevor Curnow observes, “the wise are those who can see ‘the bigger picture,’”<sup>2</sup> so they are not blinded by the parochial representation of a segment of the world, and have access to the more comprehensive or profound truth. What is perceived as central in a limited or narrow viewpoint might actually be marginalized in the bigger picture, *vice*

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<sup>1</sup> Osbeck and Robinson, "Philosophical Theories of Wisdom," p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Curnow, *Wisdom: A History*, p. 53.

*versa*. Similarly, what is initially seen as positive could ultimately be negative, *vice versa*. And these are all because the wise transcend the mundane perspective to embrace a truer reality. This, at the same time, implies that a wise individual can go “outside” the ordinary view — hence being “almost by definition an outsider.”<sup>1</sup>

Asserting that wise individuals can be outsiders does not preclude them from being insiders. Even conflicting roles can be carried out by the same person as long as they do not manifest during the same period of time. The case about a wise public and social leader can serve as an example in this regard — viewing issues out of the box and then reengage in the actual operation is undoubtedly a sensible maneuver for a wise decision-maker to do. Nonetheless, this is simultaneously suggesting that there are different options once one can go outside the box. Returning from the outside is obviously an option, jumping between two sides is feasible as well, and, more unconventionally, one may decide to leave the box forever. What is important to note is that “outside” is a relative term, suggesting the potential for an infinite progression further “outside.” The requirement of the epistemic target object for wise individuals to attain seems relevant to this with its degree-variable conception, and this may be a contributing factor to the evaluation of the degree of wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, what is noteworthy here is the underlying, potentially endless

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> If we delve deeper into this point, there is indeed some potential difference between the notion of boundless outward inclination and the common expectation for the wise to pursue further wisdom: Constantly exploring beyond one’s current stance might ultimately lead to self-denial as soon as it transcends its own conceptual boundary, whereas the ordinary anticipation for the wise to aspire to greater wisdom might (unconsciously) preset a certain limit (e.g., community values, human capacities, or an ultimate ideal like divine wisdom that cannot be surpassed, etc.). However, the issue in this regard is subtle, as it seems acceptable that an individual pursuing a thorough reflection on everything could end up nullifying every aspect of the world, while still maintain certain connection with the attribute of wisdom. Various readings of the underlying intuition can be proposed, among which, a pair of conflicting opinions could be: (i) This case is misleading; it may have invoked certain ideas that we have about wisdom with its narrative, yet such invocation is made by only some elements contained (such as “reflection”), rather than by a comprehensive consideration of the case, which should suggest otherwise. And (ii) This case accurately reflects our intuition that “meaningless” is a possible outcome of a wise evaluation of the world; in fact, it may reflect a further intuition, which is that we might doubt the value of the world in everyday context, yet we expect only the wise to confirm our guess in a compelling manner. While discerning which interpretation is more plausible might be intriguing, space constraints prohibit us from detailing the potential debate. If (i) points to the more reasonable direction to understand the seemingly self-denying inclination, then there is no need to discuss it anew, as it is not explicitly proposing something exceeding our earlier exploration of the epistemic target objects for the wise. Conversely, if (ii) suggests a more convincing interpretation, then the limitless outwardness might need to be considered independently as a plausible requirement negating another existing

outward inclination, which implies the possibility of transcending the process of transcendence itself. This might invoke the philosophical idea that endless negation leads to self-negation. Indeed, many stories about wisdom are about how to transcend any deliberate inclination. A famous example in this respect might be one of Huineng's teachings from Zen Buddhism:

The mind is the bodhi tree  
 the body is the mirror's stand  
 the mirror itself is so clean  
 dust has no place to land.<sup>1</sup>

Even if achieving ultimate transcendence is not feasible, transcending a firmly negating attitude towards specific belief sets, like the ordinary worldview, still appears to be an attainable goal. Thus, a hermit's radical negation is not ultimately radical, as it does not reach the limit when the scope is reasonably broadened.

To recapitulate, our current exploration began with analyzing an extreme instance of the hermit case in contrast to the political and social leader case. The aim was to uncover the underlying concern of the conflict between the two cases among others. Initially, this extremity was perceived as the hermit's negation of the commonly accepted understanding of the world. However, upon closer examination, this characterization appears less radical than first thought. Then, is there a truly radical element in this instance? Until now, we have assumed that the "extreme" instance of the hermit case is about an extreme hermit. Given that a hermit in her general kind is against living "ordinarily," a radicalized hermit seems to signify a hermit leading an exceptionally unusual life, characterized by extraordinary solitude, discipline, and/or abstinence, etc. Yet, the matter might be more approachable if we shift the focus from radicalizing the hermit's lifestyle to intensifying the comparative analysis between ascetic and ordinary lives. In this light, the crux of our investigation might not lie in identifying the most extreme examples but in illuminating the issue to increase its informativeness and insight. Achieving this requires a more explicit

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plausible requirement. This, albeit not directly, will be taken into account within the general discussion of potentially conflicting plausible requirements for the wise in Chapter 5.

<sup>1</sup> *The Platform Sutra: The Zen Teaching of Hui-Neng*, trans. Red Pine (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), §8.

articulation of the key similarities and differences between the two cases, rather than simply seeking radicalization. This shift of emphasis directs us to examine how to create a stark contrast. For our analysis, this involves introducing two wise contenders with opposing worldviews: one adhering to secular expectations and the other pursuing an other-worldly path. Instances of the former are readily found in the political and social leader case, while the latter is exemplified in the hermit case (such as the “extreme” hermit instance), albeit neither may represent an extreme in and of itself.

This objective might initially seem straightforward, yet achieving a fair comparison is often more challenging than it appears. In prevalent storytelling, portrayal of the conflicting parties often comes with a specific inclination. For example, in common narrative in religious or spiritual contexts, ordinary understanding of the world is typically depicted as inferior compared to a hermit’s “extraordinary” perspective. However, reality presents a different picture. Sages engaged in religious or spiritual pursuits are not the sole embodiments of wisdom — they are regarded as some of the most recognizable wise figures along with worldly wise individuals. Indeed, in the example of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, pursuing a path opposite to their approach does not preclude one from attaining wisdom. One could still be acknowledged as wise by following a path that the seven sages might reject or negate, as an instance of the public and social leader case. This reveals a significant contrast: though individuals may follow vastly different paths, each path can be recognized as a journey towards wisdom at the same time.

The diversity of wisdom is evident, but its simultaneous recognition across different contexts is often overlooked. If we focus on this feature, the key concern in question is not how much a wise hermit can deviate from conventional expectations, but that her unique path to wisdom can be considered plausible, even when an opposite approach is also acknowledged as promising. In other words, this issue encompasses not just their conflicts, but also their coexistence. An excellent example in this regard is the contrast between divine wisdom and human wisdom. While we might have reasons to sidestep divine wisdom from everyday scenarios, at the end of the day, this might seem more like an avoidance of complex debates rather than a justified exclusion. After all, it appears that the wisdom embodied in the following case can be readily acknowledged as well:

**Oracle:** An oracle serves diligently in her temple, relaying messages from various gods to worshippers, including life teachings, future prophecies, and revelations of truth. Deeply trusted and respected, she is viewed as a wise and reliable consultant, a role she gladly accepts. Her wisdom, however, extends beyond responding to people’s inquiries. Blessed with divine favor, she gains access to an extraordinary epistemic realm, enhancing her capabilities beyond human limits. Aware of her unique position, she recognizes that displaying her gifts will further promote her reputation for wisdom. She is willing to do so, as this wisdom is inspiring and beneficial for the community’s well-being.

The key idea of this case is that a character might be wise, albeit without any explicit mention of humanly efforts toward that attainment. While this case is made up, the concept of becoming wise through divine association is common in ancient stories (such as the later elaborations on Enoch’s wisdom through divine assistance).<sup>1</sup> This situation evidently contradicts certain widely-held expectations for the wise, particularly the plausible requirement of epistemic characteristics developed through personal effort, as the case could be even further radicalized to eliminate any need for the character’s own exertions. At first glance, the tension still emerges because, although the oracle does not exhibit the type of wisdom we typically expect from human agents, it is difficult to deny her wisdom in a difference sense. However, now that we focus on the contrast between such wisdom, the emphasis can be put on the concurring, yet contradictory requirements regarding human effort. What is interesting to note is that while wisdom inevitably involves multiple facets, the conflict in this respect can be presented in a unique way: that is, a pronounced negation between the hermit’s and the oracle’s belief systems, centered around a specific conflict that can be propositionalized as an affirmation and a negation of the requirement of human endeavors. This constitutes a propositional contradiction that presents the conflict most explicitly. In this light, the “extremity” of the hermit case may not need to be understood in terms of the radical nature of the beliefs themselves, but in how strikingly and clearly the contradiction between them is presented.

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<sup>1</sup> Curnow, *Wisdom: A History*, pp. 40-43. More details in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (USA: Doubleday & Company, INC., 1983).

A more specific example may go as follows: Imagine a public and social leader who actively engages in a series of social movements with the goal of “making the world a better place.” Unlike many, this leader genuinely believes in the value of these public activities, which implies both her trust in the contribution of these activities to public welfare and her belief that the welfare she promotes is tied to the genuine well-being of the general public. With such an understanding of the relationship between her actions and the world, she meets the set of requirements for the wise as outlined in the last subsection. Using her wisdom, she steadily pushes the world towards the ideal vision that she conceives, and thereby becomes widely recognized as a wise leader. In contrast, imagine a hermit who, after a series of careful and thorough reflections on the world, embraces the conviction that “this world” lacks genuine significance. For a truly meaningful life, one must transcend the ordinary view, recognizing that the immediately experienced world is not the truly valuable world to be explored and dedicated to. Thus, she rejects ordinary expectations for leading a good life, including those expectations from her family, and starts pursuing a higher reality beyond the physical world. Ultimately, she attains a new perspective, which she deems superior, enabling her to reinterpret worldly phenomena. Many people, even those who sincerely respect the social leader, find the hermit’s reinterpretation enlightening and practically soothing, therefore ascribe wisdom to her, despite her deeds and proposals not aligning with typical societal norms that they adhere to.

While numerous similarities and differences may emerge when comparing these two characters, one fundamental thesis becomes central to understanding their wisdom: “The world that we experience daily holds genuine significance.” The protagonist of the first scenario implicitly agrees with this premise, as her dedication to contributing to the world suggests a belief in its inherent value. On the contrary, the second character, the hermit, must reject this notion, as her pursuit of other-worldly significance would otherwise seem unreasonable. Therefore, when examining these two characters closely, they appear to contradict each other regarding their acceptance of this thesis, which is so fundamental that it effectively suggests a conflict between the respective belief systems that they represent. It is important to emphasize again that these characters are considered wise not by separate groups but through a unified acknowledgment of their wisdom. Despite this, their wisdom, based on their distinct worldviews, seems to be in opposition. In other words,

through their actions and beliefs, they in effect negates the other's wisdom, yet both are still recognized as wise simultaneously.

At first glance, what this example highlights is the following point: one wise individual may hold a proposition  $p$ , while another equally wise individual might hold not- $p$ . This presents a challenge to the common intuition that if  $p$  is true, then not- $p$  cannot also be true.<sup>1</sup> However, this assumption only applies if we require wisdom to be based on true beliefs. Recall our earlier discussion of the epistemic target object in Sub-subsection 2.2.3, where we did not definitively conclude that true beliefs are necessary for wisdom, but rather focused on justified beliefs. This conclusion was provisional, as intuitions seem to favor both the condition of truth and its opposite. If we genuinely acknowledge wisdom in people holding contradictory beliefs, we might be inclined to reject the truth requirement, as insisting on truth would disqualify one of the contradictory characters from being considered wise. Yet, discarding the truth condition also seems to be at odds with the intuition that wise people should hold true beliefs. Given that wise individuals are typically viewed as having achieved a high level of epistemic accomplishment, it appears counterintuitive to suggest that their beliefs might not be expected to be true.<sup>2</sup>

What is interesting to note is that, at this juncture, the issue extends beyond the content of wise individuals' beliefs. It now pertains to a more abstract dimension: Should a theory of wisdom include a truth condition as part of one's epistemic status? This deeper concern can be framed as whether the concept of wisdom involves a truth condition for beliefs, and one may then realize that this can also be formulated in a contradictorily propositional form. Nevertheless, at this level, the expectation for truth seems much less contestable. After all, if we are sincerely theorizing wisdom, then our goal is presumably to develop a true theory. Thus, the issue becomes pressing when this further level is taken into account. Moreover, one may notice that other conflicts encountered in our discussions can also be represented in this radicalized manner, as worries about the potential

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<sup>1</sup> Unless we accept non-classical logics that allow for such contradiction. However, the underlying issue that we are discussing, which essentially concern the diversity of plausible requirements for wisdom, does not simply hinge on this contradiction. Therefore, even if views like dialetheism is considered, our main discussion, especially the discussion developed in later chapters will not be significantly affected.

<sup>2</sup> The underlying intuition here will be detailed in Chapter 4.

coexistence of contradictory viewpoints on the same proposition, which fundamentally violates basic logic.

While this does not cover all underlying concerns, it helps us understand what might be more profoundly worrisome: the challenge is not just finding a unified interpretation of wisdom across contexts, but resolving potential logical paradoxes. This seems to constitute a crucial issue to address before we proceed to provide a unified account of wisdom. That said, although the underlying concern is now more explicitly presented, the required solution still suggests a need beyond relying on varied intuitive supports to choose between contradicting opinions. That is, a criterion to determine which side holds the true conception of wisdom — the normative generic concept of wisdom. Viewing the issue in this new light seems to prompt a discussion about what makes some requirements and theories of wisdom more valid than others, but it is not yet necessary to go that far. The goal of this dissertation is to propose a more convincing understanding of wisdom. The aspect of the issue that appears to immediately affect the plausibility of current offerings in the literature is the presence of contradictory beliefs, which serves as a radicalized instance of the conflicts among various plausible expectations that a wisdom theory might represent. As long as we can address this intensified issue and subsequently apply the approach by analogy to other related aspects, the exact details of the solution are not our main priority.

To make the issue more manageable, we can further narrow our focus to a specific representative consideration: whether the beliefs contributing to one's wisdom need to be true. This focus is particularly relevant due to the significant role truth plays in epistemological tradition, a topic we will explore in depth in Chapter 4. For now, our immediate aim is merely to examine the normative generic concept of wisdom through an exemplary inquiry: Is a truth condition necessary for the beliefs associated with wisdom? This question will be the subject of our subsequent discussion.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have explored the prevalent contemporary literature on wisdom, drawing from both empirical and philosophical studies. The result is both enlightening and



prompting: On the one hand, we have gathered numerous common expectations for the wise, which we can analyze from an epistemological perspective. This analysis is structured within a theoretical framework based on three developmental stages of our epistemic process: (1) epistemic characteristics (such as epistemic humility, accuracy, and prudence), (2) epistemic target object (such as justified beliefs that serve as provisional guiding principles in life and specific domains, where higher principles are unclear), and (3) corresponding practice (such as valuing wisdom, accepting the outcomes of practical inferences guided by wisdom, and the conscious application of these outcomes in one's dispositions). On the other hand, the diversity of these expectations raises concerns about a unified understanding of wisdom. This unification is intuitively appealing but difficult to achieve due to the gaps between perspectives (such as implicit vs. explicit theories and third- vs. first-person evaluations), the worries regarding the presupposition of epistemic target objects (such as the lack of consensus and the marginalization of agency), and potential conflicts among various plausible requirements (such as human vs. divine wisdom, worldly vs. reclusive wisdom), which could ultimately lead to unacceptable contradictions. Thus, to propose a more plausible account of wisdom, it seems advisable to find a way to accommodate these diverse expectations, which suggests a need to first address the underlying concerns. A promising approach could be to introduce a normative, generic concept of wisdom to assess the plausibility of any given conception of wisdom. Therefore, in the subsequent discussion, we will first delve into this possibility (Chapters 2, 3, and 4), aiming to lay a solid foundation for returning to the specifics of wisdom theorization (Chapter 5). To make the issue more approachable, we will focus on an exemplary question leading to potential conflicts: whether a wisdom theory should include a truth condition. As we will see in Chapter 4, this question might be more central in our general consideration of theorizing wisdom than it initially seems. In any case, the next chapter will commence with an examination of the plausibility and potential utility of introducing a relativistic concept of wisdom.

## Chapter 2: Why Not Relativism?

**Chapter Abstract:** This chapter explores the potential of a relativistic understanding of wisdom serving as the normative generic concept that is needed. It provides an examination of prevalent epistemic relativist theories to determine their utility in resolving epistemic disagreements, such as those encountered in discussions of wisdom. Two primary approaches to arguing for epistemic relativism are discussed: the traditional approach, which bases its arguments on the absence of factual evidence against epistemic relativism without asserting its own correctness; and the new approach, which argues from an epistemically practical standpoint that relativism effectively explains certain practices in epistemic language, yet has its difficulty in meeting some other expectations of epistemic judgment. The conclusion is that epistemic relativism holds both advantages and disadvantages, but no decisive rationale is found for either preferring it over other positions or dismissing it entirely.

The exploration of a plausible framework for theorizing wisdom in the previous chapter brought forth a question regarding conflicting criteria for evaluating an individual's wisdom. An illustrative concern is whether a credible theory of wisdom necessitates that beliefs contributing to wisdom be true. Given the challenge in finding *the* answer to this question, this chapter examines an alternative approach, one that allows seemingly clashing views to be simultaneously considered true. The first section will introduce an appropriate interpretation of this approach, commonly referred to as relativism. The next two sections will delve into both traditionally and currently prevalent arguments supporting relativism. Through this exploration, we will not only see the strengths and weaknesses of relativism, but also various deeper issues motivating the debates surrounding it, one of which pertains directly to our understanding of the anticipated solution to the potential conflicts.

### 1. What Is Relativism?

In the previous chapter, a range of interpretations of wisdom was presented, revealing plausible yet potentially conflicting implications among them. At this point, we are naturally (though not necessarily) inclined to evaluate their theoretical strengths and weaknesses and to determine the most suitable option for developing a plausible theory of wisdom. However, there exists a somewhat convenient alternative, which is viewing the clashing accounts as merely *prima facie* conflicting. Perhaps, ultimately, they can coexist without denying one another, just as relativism suggests.<sup>1</sup> Typically, relativists believe that an utterance can only be appropriately understood when considered relative to certain parameters. It follows that as long as debaters are justified in holding an opinion in at least one distinct context,<sup>2</sup> framework, etc., their views, though clashing on the surface, could still all be correct.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, if relativism is plausible, we might accommodate various accounts of wisdom without being worried by their potential conflicts, provided they are true in relation to at least one specific epistemic standard.

Here, we must be careful before we proceed. It is possible to take *subjectivism* as a radical form of relativism, but relativism, when understood properly, should have nothing to do with subjectivism.<sup>4</sup> Subjectivists, roughly speaking, embrace subjective truth, and reject objective truth. But there are no grounds for either accepting or declining their

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<sup>1</sup> See Maria Baghramian and J. Adam Carter, "Relativism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2022, 2015). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/relativism/>. for an overview of different relativist positions.

<sup>2</sup> The relation between relativism and contextualism will be discussed in light of John MacFarlane's works in section 3.

<sup>3</sup> Note that relativism can pertain to various aspects and does not always directly relate to truth. For instance, in our discussion, the primary focus is on whether a "truth" condition should be included in a definition, theory, or account of wisdom, as encountered in Chapter 1. If wisdom does not inherently involve "truth," then an account of wisdom should accordingly exclude a truth condition. Conversely, if a truth condition is essential for wisdom, then any theoretical framework of wisdom must incorporate this aspect to be considered accurate. In essence, for our account of wisdom to be plausible, it is expected to correctly reflect the actual nature of wisdom. Therefore, the type of relativism that is pertinent to this dissertation concerns the standard of such correctness, which is distinct from relativism about truth itself.

<sup>4</sup> A radical construal of relativism may lead to subjectivism, but as Paul Boghossian writes: "If the relativist opts for saying that relativism is justified only relative to his (the relativist's epistemic principles, it doesn't immediately follow that he is just saying what 'he finds it agreeable to say.' Indeed, it doesn't even follow that he is saying that relativism is justified only relative to epistemic principles that are *unique* to relativists. For all we are entitled to assume, he may mean that relativism is justified by a set of principles that are endorsed by relativists and non-relativists alike." (Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 83.)

position, for it is literally unreasonable. Provided subjectivism is true, we will be automatically justified when we follow our own arbitrary thoughts without reflection or any other reasons. To put it another way, if a proposition is true for a subject, then it is true, period. Therefore, if “Subjectivism is false.” is true for me, then it is true, and subjectivism is consequently untrue. The moral of subjectivism’s failure is that a position about truth must have at least some recourse to objective elements, and, thus, an intelligible version of relativism should be compatible with objective standards too. In fact, to claim that there only exists relative truth is not arguing against objectivity, far from it. What relativists aim at is the notion of the absolute or universal truth that proponents of disparate standards are all supposed to agree upon. So, even for the relativists, objective truth may still exist, though merely relatively. This differentiation also matters from a practical point of view, because subjectivism, due to its extremely bizarre conception of “truth”, can hardly evaluate and compare conflicting claims in a plausible manner. As a result, it aids little in settling disagreements if we do not wish to make our disputes look ridiculous. By contrast, relativists do think that at least some disagreements are respectable, but instead of trying to figure out which alternative fares better, they offer a way to keep all the worthy competitors on board. Of course, this does not suggest that we should agree with their suggestions. However, let us bear in mind relativism’s aspiration to provide a win-win solution and see if it could help address our current stalemate.

It is also important to distinguish relativism *simpliciter* from a qualified form of relativism — it might be beneficial to label them as “global relativism” and “local relativism” respectively. A famous example of the former position is Protagoras’ doctrine that man is the measure of all things, which can be interpreted as “every judgment is true *for* (in relation to) the person whose judgment it is,”<sup>1</sup> manifesting the key feature of global relativism that views all truth as relative. While this claim appears as implausible as it

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<sup>1</sup> Myles Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*," *The Philosophical Review* 85, no. 2 (1976): p. 172.

initially seems, the core problem with it, as many philosophers have already pointed out,<sup>1</sup> is its unavoidable self-refutation.<sup>2</sup> Here is Myles Burnyeat's helpful remark:

[...] a proposition of the form "x is F" is true (relatively) for person a, if and only if "x is F for a" is true (absolutely). Call this the principle of translation. Such a principle is needed, I submit, if we are to be able to give sense to the notion of relative truth and operate with it in reasoning.<sup>3</sup>

To put it simply, the Protagorean doctrine of measure is supposed to relativize *all* truth, but to do so, it has to admit of one principle *unrelativized*, namely, the principle of translation.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a Protagorean relativist account will inevitably go against itself and turn out to be incoherent. This criticism can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to similar arguments for global relativism, and, consequently, relativism *simpliciter* is not an ideal choice for settling the disputes that we find in the literature on wisdom. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily result in the outright dismissal of all forms of relativism. There still exist live options for us to consider within the camp of local relativism. A theory taking such a position may concede that there might be absolute truth, but in domains that it concerns, there are only relative standards. In our case, what is apparently most relevant is epistemic relativism, suggesting that epistemic terms should be validated in relation to specific contexts, systems, etc. For a more refined interpretation, Harvey Siegel has offered a technical characterization using the term "epistemological relativism":

*ER*: For any knowledge-claim  $p$ ,  $p$  can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and standards of evaluation  $s_1, \dots, s_n$ ; and, given a different set (or sets) of

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> Some philosophers understand Plato as categorizing Protagoras as a subjectivist rather than a relativist, though the relativist interpretation is more commonly accepted. See, e.g., Gail Fine, "Plato's Refutation of Protagoras in the Theaetetus," *Apeiron* 31, no. 3 (1998). Cited in John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 30, n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation," p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> This problem could be construed as a dilemma: If relativists do not effectively commit to the principle of translation, they will encounter the problem of infinite regress, wherein every claim we make is only true in relation to a parameter, and a claim about this claim is only true in relation to a further parameter, continuing endlessly. Note that Burnyeat's original argument is much more sophisticated, but it will not be presented in full here due to space constraints. See J. Adam Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Ch. 2. for more discussion. *C.f.* MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, pp. 30-33.

background principles and standards  $s'_1, \dots, s'_n$ , there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) alternative sets of principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets in evaluating  $p$  with respect to truth or rational justification.  $p$ 's truth and rational justifiability are relative to the standards used in evaluating  $p$ .<sup>1</sup>

This account may initially appear overly sophisticated, but as we delve into the theories of epistemic relativism in this chapter, its clarity will gradually become evident. For the moment, what is essential to note is that there are three key elements involved: (i) a knowledge-claim, (ii) various standards for evaluating this claim, and (iii) the absence of a further standard for us to determine which of these standards should be adopted. Consider, for example, Richard Rorty's well-known discussion of the debate between Cardinal Bellarmine and Galileo over the Copernican theory: Nowadays, most people tend to believe that Galileo is right, and Bellarmine is wrong. However, Rorty holds a different view:

Bellarmino thought the scope of Copernicus's theory was smaller than might be thought. When he suggested that perhaps Copernican theory was really just an ingenious heuristic device for, say, navigational purposes and other sorts of practically oriented celestial reckoning, he was admitting that the theory was, within its proper limits, accurate, consistent, simple, and perhaps even fruitful. When he said that it should not be thought of as having wider scope than this he defended his view by saying that we had excellent independent (scriptural) evidence for believing that the heavens were roughly Ptolemaic.<sup>2</sup>

It seems to Rorty that Bellarmine could also be right, given that he had enough evidence required by his own (epistemic/religious/cultural/...) standard. But if that is the case, how are we supposed to judge which side to take? This appears to be where Rorty's point lie. He contends that neither Cardinal Bellarmine nor Galileo is "wrong." Rather, the issue lies in perceiving Galileo as *absolutely* right and the church as *absolutely* wrong. After all, the judgments that we make today are greatly influenced by the (epistemic) standard of our days. That is, "'a method for finding truth' which takes Galilean and Newtonian mechanics as paradigmatic." In contrast, the "'grid' which emerged in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was not there to be appealed to in the early

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 329.

seventeenth century, at the time that Galileo was on trial.” If there is no “some antecedent way of determining the relevance of one statement to another, some ‘grid’ (to use Foucault’s term) which determines what sorts of evidence there *could* be for statements about the movements of planets,” how can we “find a way of saying that the considerations advanced against the Copernican theory by Cardinal Bellarmine — the scriptural descriptions of the fabric of the heavens — *were* ‘illogical or unscientific?’” “What determines that Scripture is not an excellent source of evidence for the way the heavens are set up?”<sup>1</sup>

While Rorty’s conclusion leading to a relativistic view of epistemic justification is controversial, it does illustrate how an epistemic relativist picture might look like: We have (i) Bellarmine’s and Galileo’s incompatible knowledge-claims, (ii) Bellarmine’s and Galileo’s incompatible standards for evaluating their claims, and (iii) allegedly, no further standard for us to decide on whose standard we should adopt. Can epistemic relativism stand to reason and assist in handling the disputes over wisdom among philosophers? This question consists of two parts, and they need to be handled in turn before we can arrive at a definitive answer: First, epistemic relativism, as a local version of relativism specifically designed for epistemology, needs to be examined for whether it is itself a plausible theory. And second, provided that epistemic relativism is acceptable, it needs to be considered whether it is a rational option for us to relativize those controversial views on wisdom.

Our first task involves a detailed examination of the plausibility of epistemic relativism, a concept that can be interpreted in numerous ways by philosophers. Following J. Adam Carter,<sup>2</sup> some representative arguments for epistemic relativism will be selected and presented, categorized as traditional or new arguments. Traditional arguments generally focus on demonstrating how epistemic relativism might resolve apparent epistemic disagreements. By contrast, new arguments do not view epistemic relativism primarily as a means to reconcile differing opinions; rather, they propose it as the most compelling explanation for certain observed phenomena. They will be scrutinized in sequence.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 328–30.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*.

## 2. Traditional Arguments for Epistemic Relativism

This section will be devoted to arguments that may lead us to reflect on certain unsatisfactory epistemic phenomena and consider epistemic relativism as a conceptual resource to address them. Although Carter notes that they “fail to *distinctively* motivate epistemic relativism over other available alternatives, particularly, scepticism,”<sup>1</sup> these arguments are worth close inspection, especially for the new light they shed on how epistemic issues could be viewed from a practical perspective.

### 2.1 Pyrrhonian Arguments

The first type of traditional arguments that Carter mentions are motivated in a, more or less, Pyrrhonian manner. Undoubtedly, Pyrrhonism is renowned for its skeptical claims. As Markus Lammenranta observes, the Pyrrhonian problem is “older and perhaps more fundamental skeptical problematic”<sup>2</sup> than Cartesian skepticism, which is currently considered a major form of skepticism. Given that many philosophers view skepticism as an archrival to most epistemological theories, we may wonder how come an argument related to Pyrrhonism could support a theory like epistemic relativism, which still appears to advocate for human knowledge. Howard Sankey describes the issue as the following:

Epistemic relativism and scepticism constitute opposing epistemological tendencies. The epistemic relativist holds that knowledge and justified belief depend upon epistemic norms which vary with cultural or historical context. By contrast, the sceptic either denies that knowledge and justified belief are possible or else suspends judgement with respect to the possibility of knowledge and justified belief. Thus, the relativist allows that we may have knowledge or justified belief while the sceptic either denies this or withholds judgement.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> Markus Lammenranta, "The Pyrrhonian Problematic," in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, ed. John Greco (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Sankey, "Scepticism, Relativism and the Argument from the Criterion," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 43, no. 182-190 (2012): p. 182, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2011.12.026>.



This, to reveal a bit of what is ahead, does turn out to be the problem with this type of argument. However, for the moment, let us set that aside and focus on how it is possible to develop an argument for epistemic relativism based on Pyrrhonism.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1.1 The Argument from the Criterion

According to Sankey, while traditionally Pyrrhonian arguments aim to support skepticism, they also provide grounds for epistemic relativism. In essence, his argument goes as follows: Our beliefs are expected to be justified based on certain criteria, but skeptics challenge the ultimate justifiability of these criteria. Call this the problem of the criterion.<sup>2</sup> In later development of his argument, Sankey notices that skeptics' argumentative approach takes a more general form, "sometimes known as *Agrippa's trilemma*,"<sup>3</sup> which includes three unpromising methods of rationalization:

- (i) the circular argument, which resorts to begging the questions, namely, assuming the conclusion of an argument in its premises;
- (ii) the regressive argument, which resorts to infinite regress, namely, appealing to what would generate further need of justification to be justified, but the further justification would generate its own further need of justification, and so on *ad infinitum*; and
- (iii) the dogmatic argument, which resorts to judging arbitrarily, namely, concluding without proper justification.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that Sankey is *against* epistemic relativism.

<sup>2</sup> "The Problem of the Criterion" is "one of the most important and one of the most difficult of all the problems of philosophy." (Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973), p. 1.) Sankey emphasizes the significance of this specific problem for epistemic relativism to arise, though it may not be necessary to strictly adhere to his viewpoint on this matter. After all, "[i]n effect, this is the question of how to justify a criterion" (Sankey, "Scepticism, Relativism," p. 184.), and our discussion is at a more general level of how difficulties of justification may generate needs for epistemic relativism. Cf. Carter believes that the problem of the criterion is only an instance of this kind of problems (Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, pp. 246–47, ch. 3, n. 18.) For further information on the original skeptical form of this issue, see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, Revised and Expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Howard Sankey, "Epistemic Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 42 (2011): p. 562, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2011.09.012>.

Agrippa's trilemma is three of the *Modes* that were once employed by Pyrrhonian skeptics to reveal how superficially opposed views might be equally formed,<sup>1</sup> leading to the conclusion that the final justification of epistemic claims is destined to fail, and there is no ultimate warrant for solving epistemic disagreement. These three arguments are weaponized to attack not only the accepted epistemic criterion, but any foundations that we rely on to make an epistemic judgment. While Pyrrhonians use the word "criterion" in the meaning of a judging tool, in Sankey's mind, this can be analogized to "epistemic norm" in epistemology.<sup>2</sup> For Sankey, a system of beliefs consists of particular beliefs, and is paired with a set of epistemic norms that provide justification for those beliefs in that specified system. The crux is that no matter which argument is invoked, skeptics begin with the assumption that "[i]f no norm is better justified than any other, all norms have equal standing,"<sup>3</sup> which is also useful for epistemic relativists. After all, if all epistemic norms share the same level of justifiedness, it implies that there are only alternative epistemic norms, rather than a singular, superior one.<sup>4</sup> However, here is where Sankey believes epistemic relativists and skeptics part ways. For the skeptics, "[b]ecause it is not possible to determine which of the opposing judgements is correct, the realization gives rise to the suspension of belief. For the Pyrrhonians, the result of such suspension of belief is a state of tranquillity."<sup>5</sup> In contrast, epistemic relativism has a different reading of this impossibility: Since no justification is satisfactory enough, one has to admit that

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<sup>1</sup> As will be introduced shortly, Agrippa may have proposed five Modes. There are various versions and records of these Modes, some of which are controversial. However, these variations do not impact the central argument here, which is to demonstrate the unsatisfactory nature of the justification process. For a brief overview of the records of the Modes, see Paul Woodruff, "The Pyrrhonian Modes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. Robert Gregg Bury (London: William Heinemann, 1933), II, 14–16.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Sankey, "Witchcraft, Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion," *Erkenntnis* 72 (2010): p. 6, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-009-9193-7>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Sankey, "Epistemic Relativism," p. 563.

“[j]ustification depends upon, and varies with, the ultimately unjustified norms which happen to be accepted in particular communities.”<sup>1</sup>

Sankey refers to this argument that underpins both skepticism and epistemic relativism as the argument from the criterion. He even suggests that the rationale for epistemic relativism “derives ultimately from a sceptical source.”<sup>2</sup> From Sankey’s point of view, “the argument from the problem of the criterion to epistemic relativism is one of the primary, perhaps even the most fundamental, arguments for epistemic relativism.”<sup>3</sup> However, Sankey argues that this contention does not hold water.

### **Sankey’s Overriding Response**

Sankey proposes to reject the argument from the criterion based on Chisholm’s particularist strategy, which originally targets at the skeptic version of the Pyrrhonian argument. Taking it as at least one of the most important arguments for epistemic relativism, he also insists that his counterargument drawing on particularism is not simply “a response to one form of epistemic relativism among others,” but “a response to epistemic relativism itself.”<sup>4</sup> Sankey’s ambition is evident, and it makes it even more interesting to see how he plans to refute epistemic relativism once and for all. His response can be summarized as follows: The first step is illustrating Chisholm’s approach to addressing the problem of the criterion. Chisholm’s key maneuver is reversing the order of the premises and conclusion in the original skeptical argument. Skeptics suggest that our beliefs need to be supported by certain criteria, which can never be satisfactorily justified, thus rendering our knowledge insecure. On the contrary, epistemic particularists firmly acknowledge our possession of some knowledge. Therefore, the so-called criterion must be established aligning with these already attained items of knowledge. This approach effectively nullifies the starting point for the skeptical challenge, thereby resolving the problem of the criterion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Scepticism, Relativism," p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Chisholm, *Problem of the Criterion*.

The second step is incorporating some naturalistic elements into Chisholm's strategy in order to reject epistemic relativism. What we can learn from Chisholm's response to skepticism is that our epistemic criteria are, in fact, identified after certain cases of knowledge are established, so even if the criteria are not good enough, this problem has no impact on the prior fact that we have knowledge — it is the criteria that should be revised in light of what we know. However, responding to epistemic relativists will demand more: Not only do epistemic relativists ask for a response to the problem of the criterion, but they also argue that unless *the* epistemic norm is justified in a satisfying way, we have to confess that there are only ultimately unjustifiable epistemic norms, rather than the absolute or universal epistemic norm. To meet this extra requirement, Sankey suggests combining a naturalistic approach with Chisholm's solution: "For if we think of epistemic norms as themselves subject to empirical test, then we are able to evaluate norms on the basis of knowledge that is obtained in an empirical manner."<sup>1</sup> This appears to be a powerful response, as it entitles us to choose between alternative epistemic norms based on a reliable method for testing how well they contribute to gathering information.

### **Carter's Undercutting Response**

Sankey's solution demonstrates that specific pieces of knowledge can serve as benchmarks for empirically assessing the reliability of different epistemic norms. This approach effectively addresses the premise demanded by epistemic relativists: a further standard to determine which epistemic standard should be adopted. Its essence lies in acknowledging the premise and then devising a strategy to confront it, thereby countering the argument from the problem of the criterion with an *overriding* strategy.<sup>2</sup> While this seems promising, it is important to remember that for this strategy to work, another crucial premise must also be taken into account — namely, that the argument in question represents the strongest, or at least one of the strongest, arguments supporting epistemic relativism as a valid philosophical stance. But is this type of argument truly a reliable foundation for epistemic relativism? The answer appears to be negative. Pyrrhonian-style arguments are traditionally known for their skeptical outcome, and one might naturally

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<sup>1</sup> Sankey, "Witchcraft, Relativism," p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 247, ch. 3, n. 28.

wonder why this view should be changed. Yet, Sankey's counterargument does not seem to provide any compelling reason to favor epistemic relativism over skepticism in the first place. Carter's comment on this matter is worth citing:

In short, even if we *accept* Sankey's intermediate conclusion that all epistemic norms are *equally unjustified*, it looks like the dialectical position favours relativism no *more* than it favours a move in the sceptical direction — *viz.*, a move from the intermediate conclusion that all norms are equally unjustified to the *withholding of judgment* about whether a given epistemic norm is correct.<sup>1</sup>

Carter not only points out the absence of a reason indicating why we should side with epistemic relativists rather than skeptics, which undermines the overriding strategy,<sup>2</sup> but also presents an *undercutting* strategy against the argument from the criterion on this basis.<sup>3</sup> This, in effect, replaces Sankey's argument. Nevertheless, Sankey still provides some valuable insights worth considering. His claim that the rationale for epistemic relativism ultimately derives from a sceptical source might turn out to be implausible from a *theoretical* perspective. However, what is clear is merely that epistemic relativism is not more tenable than skepticism, and this does not immediately imply that epistemic relativism is rejected for being incorrect. Furthermore, from a *practical* perspective, there are indeed overlapping intuitions supporting our choice of epistemic relativism *and* skepticism — that is, our desire to solve some troubling epistemic phenomena, for instance, Agrippa's trilemma and irresolvable disagreement as its consequence. In other words, even if Sankey's version of the Pyrrhonian argument for epistemic relativism ultimately fails, it

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> But I do not share Carter's view that "in order to show that epistemic norms can't themselves be vindicated as epistemically justified, [Sankey is] really only making explicit the unsatisfactoriness of two 'modes' of Agrippa's trilemma: *infinite regress* and *circularity*." (ibid., p. 65.) This criticism is accompanied by a list of instances demonstrating that epistemological theories can provide epistemic justification despite Pyrrhonian challenges. For example, "foundationalists insist that something *x* can be epistemically *justified* even if *not* on the basis of some further thing *y* that one might cite as a reason for *x*." (ibid.) Perhaps, in a more sympathetic reading, the epistemic relativists in Sankey's version might argue that these conclusions are arbitrarily made and will eventually encounter fallacies like infinite regress or circularity. Related to this is another point of Carter that I omit: Carter's complete undercutting strategy sets up a dilemma for Sankey's would-be epistemic relativists, where one horn offers no rational basis "to positively *recommend* one possibility *over* another on any rational basis," and the other requires simultaneously embracing epistemic relativism over skepticism and "foundationalism as a viable way to vindicate a given epistemic norm as justified." (ibid., p. 71.) In my view, the issue raised in the first horn of the dilemma is sufficient to challenge the rise of epistemic relativism, at least for the purpose of my current discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 247, ch. 3, n. 28.

is still important to note the underlying practical concern shared by both epistemic relativism and skepticism.

### 2.1.2 The Argument from Disagreement

Recall that ancient skeptics employ *Modes* in their arguments against the availability of “knowledge”, and Agrippa is the one to whom we attribute *five*, rather than three, of the most frequently adopted Modes. The Five Modes include: arguments from disagreement, infinite regress, relativity, hypothesis, and circularity. Sankey’s discussion of Agrippa’s trilemma outlines three of them, namely, infinite regress, hypothesis (arbitrary judgment) and circularity. This choice is understandable because the arguments from disagreement and relativity play some very different roles. As Katja Vogt observes: “Skeptical examination often begins with the Mode of Disagreement: different answers to a given question are surveyed, and the conflict between them is observed. [...] Scholars have observed that [...] the Mode of Relativity, does not really fit into the Five Modes.”<sup>1</sup> Delving deeper into why this is so may go beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, it seems that the Mode of Disagreement serves as a Mode in a more fundamental sense, while the Mode of Relativity is less worth discussing in this context. Thus, setting aside the Mode of Relativity, this sub-subsection focuses on how, in a different way than the trilemma’s, the Mode of Disagreement could give rise to rational acceptance of approaches like epistemic relativism or Pyrrhonian skepticism.

#### **Relativism as a Disagreement Resolution Strategy**

Although Sankey — for the purpose of countering epistemic relativism with a particularist plus naturalist approach to establishing further epistemic standards — frequently emphasizes “the criterion” in his work, what substantially advances his proposed argument for epistemic relativism is not the criterion itself, but rather the disagreement surrounding it. And this, according to Carter, is actually a well-known source of motivation for epistemic relativism:

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<sup>1</sup> Katja Vogt, "Ancient Skepticism," ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2021: The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/skepticism-ancient/>.

That is, the very *fact* that we can't (or so it seems) no-question-beggingly resolve disagreements about what epistemic principles, norms and facts are true has been famously regarded as a motivating reason for embracing the picture offered by the epistemic relativist, where justification is essentially local.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective, the major shortcoming of Sankey's argument is not its foundation on the discord between proponents of different epistemic norms. Rather, it lacks a method to bridge the gap between:

- (A) All epistemic standards are ultimately unjustifiable, so our disagreements are ultimately irresolvable.
- (B) This is a problem that needs to be solved. And
- (C) We must turn to epistemic relativism to overcome this problem.<sup>2</sup>

Carter's undercutting response highlights the failure of the argument from the problem of the criterion to reach (C). However, the epistemic relativists in Sankey's narrative may fail even earlier — they might not even achieve (B). After all, if we accept that none of us can be ultimately justified in holding a belief that contradicts others' beliefs, so what? What reason do we have to ponder further? Why seek an explanation for this? And why should we strive to find a way to alleviate the situation? On this point, Steven Hales's argument for relativism is much more persuasive, as it demonstrates the necessity for us to deliberate on the issue at hand. Hales argues that there are only five basic ways to resolve a deadlock where no agreement is possible, namely, five disagreement elimination strategies:

- (i) *Keep argue until someone capitulates*: To continue arguing is by default what we do in everyday life when faced with epistemic clashes.
- (ii) *Compromise*: A more contentious strategy is for two parties to mutually concede that both sides are partly right whilst partly wrong.
- (iii) *Ambiguity*: Disputants may as well recognize that it is their misunderstanding of the meaning of words or other contextual factors that produce their intractable disagreement.

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Note: The items in this list will be referenced throughout the following subsections of this section.

(iv) *Pyrrhonian skepticism*: Provided that there is no realistic prospect of resolution to an everlasting dispute, both parties may opt for suspension of judgment and give up the fight.

(v) *Relativism*:<sup>1</sup> Or we can simply announce that everyone is a winner and thus put an end to the ongoing debate.<sup>2</sup>

All five of these strategies aim to resolve disagreements in a general sense, with each functioning in a unique manner under specific conditions.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Hales contends that “there are certain kinds of disagreements to which continued argument, compromise, ambiguity, and Pyrrhonism give especially unappealing answers.” In such cases, he argues that we should “vote for relativism as the best solution.”<sup>4</sup> The requirement goes as follows:

Relativism as a solution to disagreement is adequately motivated when (1) we have uncovered a genuine irreconcilable difference, a disagreement that is epistemically irresolvable because there is no such thing as the right kind of evidence to settle it and (2) the alternative solutions to disagreement are not available.<sup>5</sup>

In Hale’s assessment, the other four solutions are effective when it is possible to establish what counts as evidence and what does not. However, their prospects become bleak once agreement on this standard itself cannot be reached. Consider his toy example:

Suppose that Jack and Diane are disagreeing about the age of Earth. Jack maintains that P: Earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old. Diane denies P. In addition, Jack and Diane disagree about what kind of evidence is relevant to settling the dispute over P. Jack thinks that the appropriate evidence is the data provided by the latest geological radiometric dating techniques applied to ancient rocks and meteorites, Diane believes that the right evidence is instead the Bible and its

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<sup>1</sup> Hales is not stressing a local version of relativism in this paper, but he does say the following: “All disagreements are epistemic in nature and the different approaches to solving them simply exploit different ways in which we can go wrong.” (Steven D. Hales, “Motivations for Relativism as a Solution to Disagreements,” *Philosophy* 89 (2014): p. 71.) We will not delve into Hales’s relativistic stance, for it does not affect the main idea.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64–72.

<sup>3</sup> Hales particularly argues that disagreements about personal taste can be resolved through alternative strategies, thus negating the need for relativism’s intervention. For approaches that utilize predicates of personal taste, see works such as MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, among others.

<sup>4</sup> Hales, “Motivations for Relativism,” pp. 71–72.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.



interpreters (she is especially taken with the Venerable Bede's ecclesiastical derivation that Earth was created in 3952 BCE).<sup>1</sup>

Jack and Diane disagree on both the truth of P and the evidence needed to ascertain its truth. However, they might still reach a consensus; perhaps they share a common standard for determining relevant evidence. Diane might be persuaded to abandon her stance against P in her reflective equilibrium if Jack convinces her that they both value a coherently integrated network of beliefs and that P must be affirmed as it is the only proposition fitting in with other scientific beliefs in their set. The process of mediation might be difficult, but it is conceivable how different elimination strategies could lead to a successful resolution, rather than resorting to relativism.

Call the evidence for a judgment the *first-order evidence*, and the evidence for determining what counts as first-order evidence *second-order evidence*.<sup>2</sup> The real problem, i.e., the irreconcilable difference, arises “[w]hen negotiations over higher-order evidence break down.”<sup>3</sup> This is where negotiations collapse comprehensively — that is, an impasse where we find no agreement upon the truth or falsity of a proposition, upon what first-order evidence should be considered to validate the proposition, nor upon what second-order evidence should be relied on to reassess the strength of the first-order evidence. Here, strategies (i), (ii), and (iii) become ineffective: The solution of continued arguments may work, but merely in a strange sense, for without a shared standard of basic evidence, no one will be compelled by reason to concede. The approach of mutual concession is impractical, as viewpoints involved are simply incompatible, and existing clashes do not magically disappear when disputing parties pretentiously compromise. The method of locating ambiguity or other contextual factors does not seem promising, or even relevant

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Carter offers a more refined formulation, namely, his *Archimedean meta-standard*: “a meta-standard can play the kind of role that it would need to play in order to bring interlocutors locked into an otherwise irreconcilable position into a non-questionbegging resolution, only if it is *both*: (i) *appropriately neutral*, such that it can be appealed to non-question-beggingly by either side; and (ii) *appropriately discriminatory*: not epistemically *inert*.” (Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 83.)

<sup>3</sup> Hales, “Motivations for Relativism,” p. 79.

anymore, because at this point, careful disputants should have already ruled out these distractions.<sup>1</sup>

There remain two options. Regarding the Pyrrhonian skeptic strategy, Hales's attitude is a little bit complicated. On the one hand, it seems to Hales that Pyrrhonism is a despicable choice. As he puts it: "Really, the skeptic has no idea what to believe, and so removes from the fray altogether."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, its plausibility makes it something that Hales cannot easily dismiss. He invites us to consider that there is a proposition P', and Jack and Diane disagree over its truth-value, relevant evidence, and the criteria establishing that relevance:

Pyrrhonism looked like the appropriate response when (1) we'll never have enough evidence to settle a dispute, or (2) when we'll never have the right kind of evidence to settle one. One way to understand Jack and Diane's conflict over P' is just another case of either (1) or (2). That is, either they can't get enough second-order evidence to determine what the appropriate first-order evidence is to resolve the truth-value of P', or they can't get the right kind of second-order evidence. If that's what's going on, then Pyrrhonism again seems to be the right move[.]<sup>3</sup>

While Hales tends to show that (iv) is only applicable in extreme situations, admittedly, this is not a rejection of any sort. As he goes on and says: "I don't know how to decisively rule out this interpretation. Pyrrhonic skepticism is throwing in the towel[.]"<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, suppose we resist the lure of skepticism and agree with Hales that (iv) is less ideal than supposed, the remaining relativistic strategy becomes the most straightforward peacemaking method we can opt for to avoid persistent failure in reaching an agreement. In this way, Hales presents relativism as the most promising approach to eliminating genuine disagreements among the five options.

Essentially, Hales's toy example is modeled on the three key elements of epistemic relativism introduced at the beginning of this chapter. However, what matters here is that, compared to Sankey, Hales more clearly illustrates why epistemic relativism should be

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion with a concrete example, see *ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

chosen as the most viable option for resolving epistemic deadlocks: First, on the basis of (A), Hales “forces” us to accept that once disagreements occur, we will sooner or later have to choose one of these strategies as a response, leading to (B). Then, for each competing approach to addressing the disagreement, Hales outlines their inevitable unsatisfactory consequences in cases involving irreconcilable differences, except for relativism, which he deems the most plausible solution, thus “forcing” us to go from (B) to (C). Hales’s argument is grounded in considerations about disagreements, or more specifically, about genuine disagreements. At first glance, it seems sound, but does it withstand closer scrutiny?

### **Problems with Hales’s Strategy**

It goes without saying that if we simply disregard Pyrrhonism, it becomes the elephant in the room. However, there is a more pressing issue in Hales’s argument that warrants more immediate attention. Recall that a central tactic in his argument is the introduction of the premise that there are genuine *irresolvable disagreements* that compel us to embrace relativism. According to Hales, such disagreements are rare but do occur.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in Carter’s view, “we have good inductive grounds to doubt that there are *actual* dialogues that could do the work” required by Hales.<sup>2</sup> In other words, irresolvable disagreements may not exist in real-life conversations. As Michael P. Lynch points out: “[E]ven if deep epistemic disagreements never occur, it is clear that they could. And that is enough to raise the questions with which we will be concerned.”<sup>3</sup> However, the persuasiveness of an argument is partially dependent on how “real” the scenario it addresses. If Carter is correct in stating that irresolvable disagreements are confined to purely hypothetical cases, then Hales’s argument loses much of its appeal, even if it is logically coherent and fair.

While Carter’s opinion might be seen as somewhat extreme, we do not need to fully accept it to recognize the following point: Hales has not convincingly established the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 97. Although my point remains intact, it should be noted that Hales’s “disagreements” are not limited to interpersonal disagreements. (Hales, “Motivations for Relativism,” p. 63.)

<sup>3</sup> Michael Lynch, “Epistemic Circularity and Epistemic Incommensurability,” in *Social Epistemology*, ed. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 268. We will consider what he means by “deep epistemic disagreements” shortly.

potential need for relativism as a necessity. After all, infinite possibilities always exist, but it is neither feasible nor necessary for people to concern themselves with all of them. Once this is acknowledged, we find that one of Carter's counterarguments becomes particularly enlightening, despite his more contentious conclusion:

Once one retreats from actual to merely possible dialogues with agents very different from us as what's supposed to be doing the work, one (in short) retreats a *very* long way from, say, the attempt to motivate relativism by pointing to actual disputes that proponents of dialogic arguments have traditionally taken to be the relevant ones.<sup>1</sup>

What is worth emphasizing is that if disagreements were effective in motivating epistemic relativism, especially in the way that Hales describes as making everyone a winner, then these disagreements should be significant — found in debates where people seriously engage and care about each other's thoughts. Otherwise, there would be no real winners, as participants would simply be drifting towards an inevitable outcome, perhaps without even realizing it, and no one's desire to triumph over others would be fulfilled. Considering this, Hales's argument fails to convincingly move from (A) to (B), as it lacks the compelling rationale for seeking a solution to the problem.

Furthermore, even if, against all odds, we do reach (C) via (B), it does not seem to be the case that epistemic relativism is invoked as an *epistemic* solution, but rather as a *practical* one. This leads to what Carter calls the gap problem: “[E]pistemic relativism might well be true, but if it is, it's not going to be established by the fact that *believing* it is true can help us to stop arguing.”<sup>2</sup> An epistemic reason for choosing epistemic relativism should justify our belief in the truth of what epistemic relativism asserts about our epistemic activities.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Hales's argument does no more than explaining why

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 90. Carter outlines four challenges to his dialogic interpretation of Hales's argument. For the scope of our discussion, I will omit the details of how the dialogic argument operates and one challenge that seems less convincing: the overgeneralization problem. This problem assumes that if epistemic relativism can be justified by hypothetical cases, then other forms of relativism, including the less favorable global relativism, might also be justified. However, even if this challenge holds, its impact on epistemic relativism need not be a major concern, as it hinges on the possibilist problem, which we are set to address shortly.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> We will revisit this point when discussing the fundamental incompatibility of epistemic relativism with mainstream epistemology in the next chapter.

relativism is necessary to resolve genuine disagreements, a practical reason for embracing relativism that does not affirm its theoretical validity. While it lacks justification favoring relativism in the epistemological context, its portrayal of skeptics' approach appears surprisingly rational. After all, if we cannot determine whose beliefs are ultimately justifiable, suspending judgment is more reasonable than hastily concluding that everyone has the right to claim victory. To better understand this point, we can follow Carter and consider an echoing stance named the conciliatory view in the literature on peer disagreement, which offers a valuable comparison:<sup>1</sup>

The matter of what the reasonable response is in the face of disagreement is, along with debates about testimony and transmission, perhaps the most hotly debated contemporary issue in social epistemology. And so it will be instructive to consider the contemporary formulation of the kernel of the philosophical problem: is doxastic revision rationally required in the face of a recognized *peer* disagreement?<sup>2</sup>

By “peer”, epistemologists mean epistemic agents who are equally informed and equally likely to make the right judgment on a given matter, a sensible criterion for establishing a philosophically interesting case of disagreements.<sup>3</sup> Carter identifies two primary responses to peer disagreements: the steadfast view, which asserts that one can rationally maintain their belief and disengage from the argument,<sup>4</sup> and the conciliatory view, advocating for giving equal weight to each party's claims<sup>5</sup> or refraining from judgment, thus leaning towards agnosticism.<sup>6</sup> The latter is inherently skeptical,<sup>7</sup> and Carter emphasizes that this approach to resolving disputes among peers may inadvertently support

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<sup>1</sup> Carter takes this as the fourth problem: “it looks like — at least in some clear respects — the sceptic is poised to claim an important advantage over the relativist.” (Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 101.) The essence of this argument appears to be reasonable and broadly applicable.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Note that conclusions drawn from these cases might also be relevant in scenarios involving epistemic superiors and inferiors.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Thomas Kelly, “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement,” in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* (2005).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Adam Elga, “Reflection and Disagreement,” *Noûs* 41 (2007).

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Richard Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements,” in *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular*, ed. Louise Anthony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> To be fair, it appears that Carter's perspective is primarily influenced by Feldman's view.

skepticism. For instance, as Clayton Littlejohn observes, if we are discouraged from committing to controversial propositions in the face of peer disagreements, we might conclude that it is best to abstain from judging most subjects we are usually confident about.<sup>1</sup> Carter contends that this could amount to endorsing a mild form of skepticism, as skeptics argue we possess less knowledge than we naïvely believe.<sup>2</sup>

The key takeaway here is not to determine which of these views — steadfast or conciliatory — is more credible. Rather, the analogy suggests that from the practical rationality of conciliatorism, we might deduce theoretically that we know less than we think. Moreover, by suspending judgment from a theoretical standpoint of skepticism, we achieve the practically desirable aim of resolving disagreements.<sup>3</sup> In essence, if Pyrrhonism is correct, we can eliminate persistent irresolvable disagreements, in a way that implicitly leads us to accept at least a less extreme form of Pyrrhonism, recognizing that our knowledge is more limited than we assume and thus we should suspend judgment. In Carter’s words, this is closing the gap, a theoretical goal that Hales’s version of epistemic relativism fails to accomplish. It turns out that, similar to Sankey’s argument, Hales’s strategy is once again driven by practical considerations but lacks theoretical justification — not clearly wrong, but not self-evidently right either. What is worse is that, here, skepticism is not just another competing answer; it emerges as a preferable alternative than epistemic relativism for resolving disagreements due to its ability to “close the gap.”

## 2.2 The Incommensurability Argument<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clayton Littlejohn, "Disagreement and Defeat," in *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. Diego Machuca (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> More on this shortly.

<sup>4</sup> This line of argument is inspired by Carter. Nevertheless, Carter’s original argument does not seem to be very promising, particularly regarding his rejection using an argument from parity. Carter’s primary counterargument is based on the analogy between the discussion of perceptual warrant and that of epistemic standards. Both are subject to epistemic circularity, yet no significant relativist proposal exists in the former domain. Therefore, he argues, epistemic circularity does not necessarily lead to epistemic relativism in the latter. However, as Carter himself notes, there is “some precedent for embracing a contextualist semantics for perceptual warrant attribution”, though it is not yet a salient alternative (Carter, *Metaepistemology and*

Up to this point, we have examined two arguments that arise from the Pyrrhonian Modes, or more specifically, from disagreements. Their shared shortcomings revolve around a lack of justification for their theoretical claims, despite the attractiveness of their proposed strategies to mitigate the worries raised by epistemic relativism. A possible explanation for this is that the motivation for resolution — disagreements, particularly those with irreconcilable differences — are outcomes of our epistemic activities. If our focus is merely on addressing problems created by the epistemic process, then neither the disagreements nor their resolutions appear to be fundamentally “epistemic” in a strict sense. If epistemic relativism is introduced primarily as a practical solution to the consequences of our epistemic endeavors, rather than as an epistemic position *per se*, it is unsurprising that the theoretical soundness of its claims is somewhat overlooked in the previously discussed arguments supporting it. This realization might suggest a new approach to refining the Pyrrhonian argument, but first, I wish to clarify what I mean by “epistemic,” “practical,” and “theoretical.”

### 2.2.1 The Theoretical, the Practical, and the Epistemic

Although the distinctions between “theoretical” and “practical,” as well as “epistemic” and “practical,” have been previously mentioned, some readers may still notice a lack of clarity in these explanations. This is partly because the debates over what these two pairs of terms mean are too complex and profound to delve into in this dissertation. However, considering that the ongoing ambiguity in their application may lead to confusion, a brief clarification of my usage is still necessary.

My use of “theoretical” is basic and straightforward. It refers to aspects more concerned with theories, principles, or fundamental ideas of a subject. On the other hand, “practical” relates to how plans are executed, methods applied, or experiments conducted — essentially, actions in a field. In this context, “theoretical” implicitly narrows down to

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*Relativism*, p. 260, ch. 5, n. 49.). It seems somewhat arbitrary to dismiss the potential evolution of this point, which might result in adopting a suitable contextualist or relativist approach. Consequently, in my view, the incommensurability argument remains convincing for the time being. Nonetheless, the debate is likely to intensify once Carter presents his ultimate challenge to both traditional and new arguments for epistemic relativism, which will be introduced in the subsequent chapter.

“epistemologically theoretical,” directly tied to epistemological theories. An epistemological theory is expected to address human knowledge’s nature, source, and limits, etc. Elements pertinent to these are typically considered epistemic, so something “epistemic” targets knowledge broadly, or at least aims at truth or true beliefs,<sup>1</sup> whether directly or indirectly. As Lynch notes: “[H]aving true beliefs, [...] is a good; it is what we might call a, or even the, epistemic goal.”<sup>2</sup> In this light, when I say epistemic relativism is not theoretically vindicated in the Pyrrhonian argument, I mean that the argument does not sufficiently support the belief in epistemic relativism’s propositions regarding our epistemic activities and status. It questions whether epistemic relativism accurately represents the relationship between truth and us. This theoretical aspect is separable from its practical utility. If disagreements are real and problematic, there is a practical reason to address them, and epistemic relativism could serve as a useful solution regardless of its truth status — This is Carter’s gap problem: Epistemic relativism in the Pyrrhonian argument is not established as a valid epistemic theory, and accepting its utility does not

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<sup>1</sup> This point may seem contentious to some people, as the conventional view of the epistemic goal is typically understood as possessing the truth and avoiding error. (William James famously states, “*We must know the truth; and we must avoid error.*” (William James, *The Will to Believe : And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 2010), p. 30. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ecnu/detail.action?docID=563858>.) See also Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977).) Jonathan L. Kvanvig echoes this sentiment, noting that the “[...] epistemic goal, standardly taken in epistemology over the past 50 years or so to be that of getting to the truth and avoiding error.” However, due to space constraints, I will focus solely on the pursuit of true beliefs, leaving aside other potential aims. Two considerations arise here: First, there is debate over whether we should believe a proposition because it is true or only if it is true (see, for example, Ernest Sosa, “The Place of Truth in Epistemology,” in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Michael DePaul and Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). versus Marian David, “Truth as the Epistemic Goal,” in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, ed. Matthias Steup (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).). Second, while the truth-seeking mission relates to the discussion in Chapter 4, it is noteworthy that the question of the epistemic goal “can be addressed from two quite different perspectives. One perspective is that of the theoretician. From this perspective, the question concerns what goods or values are central or primary for the theoretical task undertaken by the epistemologist, whatever that task may be. There is also another perspective, however, and that perspective is the point of view of those organisms about whose cognitive activity the epistemologist is theorizing. From this perspective, the question concerns the values or goods involved in the type of states and activities investigated by epistemologists.” Importantly, “it might also be the case that cognitive systems aim at a variety of values different from truth.” (Jonathan L. Kvanvig and Marian David, “Is Truth the Primary Epistemic Goal?,” in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. Matthias Steup, John Turri, and Ernest Sosa (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), p. 352.)

<sup>2</sup> Lynch, “Epistemic Circularity,” p. 264.



equate to endorsing its theoretical accuracy. In contrast, with skepticism, we might have to acknowledge both its practical utility and theoretical plausibility.

Yet, isn't "knowing" something, or in our case, being "wise," practical? Even if we accept the assumption that "epistemic" terms are linked with truth, couldn't they simultaneously relate to practice? Couldn't practical elements contribute to epistemic success as well? The answer to these questions appears to be yes, but it requires a careful and nuanced discussion, which is also relevant to our main query here — whether epistemic relativism, motivated by genuine disagreements, can be justified on epistemic grounds.

### **A Jamesian Approach**

Can irresolvable disagreements, which seem like poor epistemic outcomes, lead to further epistemic results, including an epistemic reason for embracing epistemic relativism? William James appears to hold an affirmative attitude when certain conditions are met:

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision, — just like deciding yes or no, — and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.<sup>1</sup>

For James, choosing an option involves selecting between two hypotheses, and a genuine option is at once a living option (a choice between two viable hypotheses), a momentous option (a once-in-a-lifetime decision),<sup>2</sup> and a forced option:

[I]f I say, "Either accept this truth or go without it," I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.<sup>3</sup>

In our scenario, epistemic relativism and skepticism represent two options in a logical disjunction. If we accept Hales's analysis as correct, it suggests that while neither option can be definitively validated, both remain viable. Additionally, we are faced with a

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<sup>1</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

crucial choice between them, while skepticism is considered unacceptable.<sup>1</sup> Then, following James's proposal, epistemic relativism, despite not being conclusively validated, can still be regarded as rationally embraceable, and this justification does not have to depend on intellectual grounds.

What James tries to offer is "an essay in justification *of* faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced."<sup>2</sup> This approach is intriguing. However, even if it, by analogy, suggests that our belief in epistemic relativism remains reasonable, the reason is ultimately established on practical considerations, as truth is valued but its attainment is not guaranteed.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, expecting this pragmatic proposal to offer epistemic reasoning may be asking too much.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the recent debate on pragmatic encroachment in epistemology might provide a more robust strategy, potentially integrating pragmatic elements into our epistemic talks.

### **Pragmatic Encroachment**

The traditional view distinguishes epistemic elements from practical ones by asserting that one's epistemic status regarding a proposition is determined solely by epistemic factors, namely, factors conducive to discovering the truth. Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath term this "epistemological purism":

(purism) For any two possible subjects S and S', if S and S' are alike with respect to the strength of their epistemic position regarding a true proposition p, then S and S' are alike with respect to being in a position to know that p.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although skepticism is intuitively rejected by many, if not most, epistemologists, it can also be dismissed in a Jamesian manner: "We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if [epistemic relativism] be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve [epistemic relativism]." (adapted from *ibid.*, pp. 39–40.) It is important to note, however, that James originally used this argument in the context of religious belief.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> We will revisit this position shortly.

<sup>4</sup> In the introduction of Section 3, a brief clarification on the usage of the terms "pragmatic," "practical," and "pragmatics" will be provided.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, "On Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75, no. 3 (2007): p. 558, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2007.00093.x>.

This thesis seems intuitive. After all, the connection between truth and the individual appears to be the primary consideration for epistemic support. However, Fantl and McGrath, among others,<sup>1</sup> argue that once action is taken into account, our intuition can be significantly altered. Their argument can be summarized as the following:

- (1) If you know  $p$ ,  $p$  is warranted enough to be a reason you have to  $\varphi$ [, ' $\varphi$ ' ranging from actions to beliefs]. (This is the knowledge-reasons link, which [McGrath dubs] '**KR**')
- (2) If  $p$  is warranted enough to be a reason you have to  $\varphi$ ,  $p$  is warranted enough to justify you in  $\varphi$ -ing.
- (3) So, if you know  $p$ ,  $p$  is warranted enough to justify you in  $\varphi$ -ing. (This is the knowledge-justification link, dubbed '**KJ**')
- (4) Whether  $p$  is warranted enough to justify you in  $\varphi$ -ing can vary between a low stakes case in which you know that  $p$  and an appropriately chosen high stakes case, holding fixed your warrant for  $p$  across the cases.
- (5) So, whether you know  $p$  can vary with the stakes, holding fixed your warrant for  $p$ . (This is the thesis of **pragmatic encroachment**).<sup>2</sup>

The key maneuver in this argument is introducing the premise that knowledge can serve as a reason for action, and our reasons for actions or beliefs are usually context-sensitive — whether a reason for acting in a certain way is good or bad is relative to the given situation, even if what supports the subject's epistemic status remains the same. Practical elements, therefore, significantly influence how acceptable the reasons behind one's actions or beliefs are, contributing substantially to one's epistemic status. Since both epistemic and practical factors should be considered in determining whether one truly knows something, pragmatic encroachment purportedly challenges purism.

While there is extensive literature on this topic, the aim here is not to delve deeply into the ongoing debate. For our current purposes, what needs to be highlighted is merely the potential fusion of the theoretical and practical perspectives in epistemology, which might be a possible logical progression of our inquiry. Yet, the fusion might not be

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<sup>1</sup> For examples, John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew McGrath, "Defeating Pragmatic Encroachment?," *Synthese* 195, no. 7 (2018/07/01 2018): p. 3053, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-016-1264-0>. For a fuller defense, see Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

promising, regardless of the actual appeal of the approach. At first sight, the argument against epistemological purism may seem unorthodox but defensible. One possible way is to argue that it is the conventional view that is to blame. For instance, John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley point out that there is an intimate connection between knowledge and action that is overlooked in both the theorization of rational action and discussions of knowledge. “This is a shame, since if there is such a connection it would seem to constitute one of the most fundamental roles for knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> However, one interpretation of this comment could be that if advocates of epistemic encroachment genuinely argue that the traditional concept of knowledge is fundamentally different, then it logically follows that their proposed new concept of knowledge is fundamentally distinct from the traditional one. If this is the case, then the contentious endorsement of pragmatic encroachment regarding knowledge might not be viewed as a substitute response to the question “What does knowledge consist of?” Instead, it could be considered an answer to an alternative question “What should the concept of knowledge be?” Taking this into account, even if we embrace the idea of pragmatic encroachment, we cannot thereby find the “epistemic” reasons that we are seeking after.

Evidently, this is only a preliminary observation without in-depth defense. Nevertheless, we may not need to address this approach thoroughly at this juncture. Except for space constraints, there are two more reasons: First, the underlying line of thought that is being developed will eventually move beyond purely epistemic concerns, leaving no epistemic factors to be fused, and no claimed territory to be encroached. Second, as will be discussed in the next chapter, Carter’s ultimate critique of epistemic relativism reveals its unnoticed but anti-mainstream metaepistemological commitment, which may render the debate on pragmatic encroachment less significant.

### 2.2.2 Epistemic Incommensurability, Epistemic Circularity, and Epistemic Practicality

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<sup>1</sup> John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley, "Knowledge and Action," *The Journal of Philosophy* 105, no. 10 (2008): p. 574, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20620129>.

Is the pragmatic approach the final card to be played? Perhaps, but also maybe not. It is important to acknowledge an implicit presumption in our discussion so far, which influences how we assess the current situation — the assumption that there might be an epistemic method to address genuine disagreements. But what if the answer to this presumption is negative?

### **Inescapable Epistemic Circularity**

At the core of irresolvable disagreements are irreconcilable differences. Hales attributes these to incompatible standards of second-order evidence. However, since reflection on our basic evidence is rare, contemplating deeper issues seems even less common. This might explain why some philosophers focus on an alternative line of reasoning originating from the ancient skeptics' argument. As Lynch puts it: “[This] problem, what I will call the problem of epistemic incommensurability, is arguably the root worry behind the criterion argument,” “[and] rooted in part in the issue of epistemic circularity.”<sup>1</sup> And according to Baron Reed, “[e]pistemic circularity is inescapable”:

Let  $F_1$ ,  $F_2$ ,  $F_3$ , etc., be a subject  $S$ 's cognitive faculties, of which  $S$  has a finite number. In order to know that  $F_1$  is a reliable source of knowledge,  $S$  will have to use either  $F_1$ , or another faculty. But if  $S$  uses  $F_1$  his belief that  $F_1$  is reliable will be epistemically circular. So,  $S$  must instead use (say)  $F_2$ . But  $S$  should not use  $F_2$  unless she knows that it is a reliable source of knowledge itself. In order to come to know this,  $S$  will have to use  $F_1$ ,  $F_2$ , or some other faculty. But  $S$  cannot use  $F_2$ , on pain of epistemic circularity. And  $S$  cannot use  $F_1$ , without first knowing that it is a reliable source of knowledge, which is still in question. So,  $S$  must use some other source—say,  $F_3$ . But it should be clear that the same issues will arise with respect to  $F_3$ , and that  $S$  will eventually run out of faculties to which she has not already appealed.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than concentrating on how experienced disagreements might pose a conundrum for our epistemic principles of justification, this line of argument posits that the process of justification itself is the root of the problem. While this viewpoint is intriguing, what Lynch and Reed observe must be handled with care. They present two intertwined problems: one is the issue of epistemic circularity, leading to skepticism via

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch, "Epistemic Circularity," p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Baron Reed, "Epistemic Circularity Squared? Skepticism about Common Sense," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73, no. 1 (2006): pp. 186–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2006.tb00610.x>.

the criterion argument, concerning “whether we in fact have knowledge or are justified in our opinions”; the other is the issue of epistemic circularity leading to the problem of epistemic incommensurability, concerning “rationally resolving explicit disagreement over the reliability of our most basic methods for forming beliefs.”<sup>1</sup> Lynch considers the latter as potentially the essence of the criterion problem — *prima facie*, just as Sankey and Hales do. The sense of déjà vu here derives from their similar goal of settling disagreements in the situations alike. Nevertheless, the distinction is that the focus now is on what causes irresolvable disagreements from the outset — our inability to escape our own epistemic circularity.

Taking advantage of the similarity, Carter offers another argument for epistemic relativism based on our practical need, this time focusing on epistemic circularity.<sup>2</sup> The newly introduced premise gives the argument more force. In Hales’s argument, genuine disagreement could motivate us to accept Pyrrhonism or epistemic relativism. However, since we do not always feel compelled<sup>3</sup> or inclined to engage in conflict with others, this does not guarantee a direct link between (A) and (B). Carter’s “merely possible” counterargument<sup>4</sup> suggests that irresolvable disagreements are less motivating than they initially appear because they are only hypothetical practical issues that never truly materialize. If we are not actually involved in direct confrontation with clashing views, an argument based on disagreements like Hales’s becomes less convincing.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, epistemic circularity occurs whenever we attempt to vindicate ourselves. This is an activity

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch, "Epistemic Circularity," p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Note again that it is Carter that adopts the approach of arguing for epistemic relativism based on epistemic circularity-incommensurability. He views the incommensurability argument as one potential version of arguments supporting epistemic relativism and believes that he has successfully countered it. While his treatment is enlightening, reasons will soon be presented regarding why his refutation does not ultimately succeed.

<sup>3</sup> As we will see shortly, there is a normative requirement for us to consider whether we are circularly justifying our beliefs.

<sup>4</sup> Currently, the “advantaged skepticism” counterargument is intentionally left aside.

<sup>5</sup> In Carter’s words, this relies on “*relational properties between interlocutors*.” (Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 109.) However, as mentioned earlier, a disagreement does not necessarily occur in an actual dialogue.

that, even if not performed in real life, is normatively required as part of self-reflection.<sup>1</sup> Realizing the profound conclusion of the self-justification process would naturally lead to a desire to resolve such an epistemic mystery. Therefore, the argument from epistemic circularity, and subsequently epistemic incommensurability, is more persuasive than the argument from disagreements, as it relies solely on internal factors to epistemic agents and is always present as part of the normative epistemic process, generating the desire that bridges (A) and (B).

Moreover, the argument derived from epistemic circularity appears more inherently “epistemic” than the argument from disagreements. Disagreements mainly represent an epistemic consequence with little impact on our epistemic process. However, as Reed demonstrates, epistemic circularity is deeply involved in the epistemic process as both an unavoidable pitfall and a critical factor in acquiring knowledge or discovering truth, thus playing a conspicuous role in achieving our epistemic goals. In this light, an argument incorporating epistemic circularity as a foundational element seems intuitively more aligned with an epistemological theory.

There are, however, implicit presumptions in these observations that need some more clarification: First, why is epistemic circularity considered problematic? Generally speaking, epistemic circularity occurs when we form a belief about the reliability of our belief source using that same source, which is not typically favorable. For example, believing a salesman solely based on his assurance of honesty is often seen as naive. As Carter remarks: “[A]pplication circularity can be understood at least in part in terms of its essentially violating some justificatory norm.”<sup>2</sup>

Second, is epistemic circularity inevitable? Could it be avoided? Reed suggests that while it might be possible to avoid it in real life, what matters is that we should not do so. To understand his rationale, we need a basic understanding of the concept of defeaters. Put roughly, when one holds a belief *B*, and encounters something, *D*, which makes it irrational

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<sup>1</sup> For a different view, see, for example, Michael Bergmann, “Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69, no. 3 (2004), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40040773>. However, Bergmann’s argument may have been overridden by Reed, whose argument will be presented shortly.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 122.

to continue holding *B*, then *D* is a defeater for *B*. Following Jennifer Lackey,<sup>1</sup> Reed maintains that:

[A] full account of defeaters will include not only *doxastic* defeaters — which are beliefs that the subject actually has — but also *normative* defeaters — where these are the beliefs that the subject ought to have.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Reed contends that normative defeaters are not limited to beliefs:

*S* has a normative defeater *D* for belief *B* at *t* if and only if *D* is either (1) a belief that *S* ought to have at *t* and *D* indicates that *B* is either false or unreliably formed or sustained or (2) a doubt that *S* ought to have at *t* and which is such that *S* ought to withhold with respect to *B*.<sup>3</sup>

Reed concedes that ordinary people “tend not to *actually* have doubts about their basic cognitive faculties.”<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless,

[c]onsider the well-known skeptical scenarios — thousands of people have been exposed to Descartes’ evil demon and millions have seen *The Matrix*. *Everyone* has had (or at least heard a compelling description of) a vivid, coherent dream. All of these experiences are like our everyday waking experience in all relevant respects, yet they are radically misleading. There is no way for us to tell that our current experiences are veridical rather than dreams or demon-induced delusions. Obviously, we should not *believe* that we are dreaming or that we are the victims of an evil demon. But we *should doubt* that our beliefs based on experiences of this sort are true.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, even if we manage to resist the temptation to defy the methods of vindication that we employ, there remains a normative defeater that initiates doubt, leading to the revelation of the inherent epistemic circularity. As Linda Zagzebski remarks, “[w]hen we reflect, we realize that we have no non-circular way to tell that our faculties

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Lackey, “Memory as a Generative Epistemic Source,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70, no. 3 (2005): pp. 474–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2005.tb00418.x>; “Rationality, Defeaters, and Testimony” (Dissertation, Brown University, 2000), ch. 1-3. Cited in Reed, “Epistemic Circularity,” p. 190, fn. 15.

<sup>2</sup> “Epistemic Circularity,” p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> This is what Bergmann, “Epistemic Circularity,” takes as the full story.

<sup>5</sup> Reed, “Epistemic Circularity,” p. 192. For a more detailed discussion of how epistemic circularity inevitably occurs, see Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, pp. 110–14. Among others, Carter’s analogy to epistemic relevance literature can greatly sharpen Reed’s view cited here.



have anything to do with the way the world is, so either we turn our pre-reflective trust into reflective trust, or we become skeptics.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, it is crucial to note that in developing an argument for epistemic relativism on this basis<sup>2</sup> — as we will proceed to do — the aim is not to assert that epistemic circularity supports choosing epistemic relativism, or even preferring it over skepticism. Rather, what needs to be demonstrated is simply that the inescapability of epistemic circularity entitles, permits, or justifies us in considering epistemic relativism as a viable option.

### **Epistemic Practicality**

As mentioned earlier, Lynch introduces the concept of “deep disagreements”, which bears a resemblance to Hales’s disagreement argument but serves different purposes. Lynch observes that typical disagreements revolve around differing opinions on facts, which often escalate into a contest over whose view of the facts is better supported. However, less commonly, disputes can escalate further, to a level that concerns how views of the facts should be supported, leading to disputes over the epistemic ladder: the quality of evidence required, the accuracy of methods in truth-tracking, and so forth. These disagreements are fundamentally epistemic, in the sense that they are disagreements over epistemic principles.<sup>3</sup> Lynch then goes on to highlight overt mutual epistemic disagreements, where both disputing parties explicitly reject each other’s assertion of an epistemic principle, and categorizes them as either deep or shallow.<sup>4</sup> He argues that an epistemic disagreement is an overt mutual *deep* epistemic disagreement when it meets the following criteria:

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Baehr and Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, “Are Intellectually Virtuous Motives Essential to Knowledge?,” in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. Matthias Steup, John Turri, and Ernest Sosa (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> Note that Reed’s original argument is *for* skepticism.

<sup>3</sup> Lynch, “Epistemic Circularity,” p. 264. Note that what Lynch means by an epistemic principle is a normative principle that confers valuable epistemic status — specifically, reliability — upon one’s belief-forming process. This value is derived from its propensity to achieve the epistemic goal, namely, producing true beliefs.

<sup>4</sup> “A *overtly* disagrees with B over some [epistemic principle] just when A explicitly withholds assent from an [epistemic principle] B asserts.” “An overt epistemic disagreement is *mutual* just when both sides to the dispute deny an epistemic principle the other asserts.” (ibid., p. 265.)

- (i) *Commonality*: There is a/multiple shared common epistemic goal(s) for the two parties to the disagreement.
- (ii) *Competition*: With respect to a given domain, two sets of distinct epistemic principles affirmed by the two parties will support different approaches to be the most reliable — which, in Lynch’s view, is most epistemically valuable as being most likely to produce true beliefs — in that given domain, and these approaches will not produce compatible beliefs about that domain.
- (iii) *Non-arbitration*: There is no further epistemic principle agreed upon by both sides that could address the dispute over the disparate epistemic principles.
- (iv) *Mutual Circularity*: The epistemic principles endorsed by the two parties cannot be vindicated by means other than an epistemically circular argument.<sup>1</sup>

Once these conditions are met, an epistemic disagreement becomes a deep one. This reveals a deeper problem that sometimes there is no shared evidence for different parties endorsing distinct epistemic principles: “Neither side can fully justify their principles without Circularity, their principles are epistemically incommensurable.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, though at first sight, Lynch’s argument is also about our real-life irresolvable disagreements, which could be modeled on the three key elements that were presented in the introduction of this chapter, the essence turns out to be about our epistemic principles — epistemic incommensurability.

Noticing that Lynch’s and Hales’s portrayals of “genuine” disagreements share many common features is not difficult, but it is more beneficial to pay attention to two aspects where they diverge: First, while Lynch, similar to Hales, believes that most epistemic disagreements are *not* deep, he recognizes cases where epistemic disagreements simply never occur. Second, unlike Hales, who stresses the importance of epistemic clashes, Lynch does not focus on such undesirable conflict. The reason behind these two points is that the most significant factor for Lynch’s argument is the elusive common ground for establishing an authoritative epistemic principle. This fact does not depend on the dispensable epistemic phenomenon of disagreements but stems from epistemic circularity,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

which is normatively required to be acknowledged. This makes Lynch's argument (which will be introduced momentarily) immune to Carter's criticism of being merely possible.

The lesson from Lynch is not just the existence of epistemic incommensurability, but its philosophical significance, especially in the study of inquiry. There are two problems posed by the conclusion of unavoidable epistemic circularity-incommensurability: The first issue is a metaepistemic one — we need to understand how we are supposed to “know” things on such an uncertain basis. Epistemic circularity prohibits us from justifying our epistemic results in a purely epistemic way, potentially leading to a seemingly anti-realist<sup>1</sup> argument, which may support epistemic relativism among other views:

- (1) Epistemic incommensurability is the fact that deep epistemic disagreements are rationally irresolvable.
- (2) One possible explanation for it is that there are no fundamental epistemic principles that are objectively true, so that we can employ them to solve these deep epistemic disagreements.
- (3) Since there are no objectively true fundamental epistemic principles, it follows that there are no objectively true derivative epistemic principles.
- (4) An epistemic principle is either fundamental or derivative.
- (5) As a result, there are probably no objectively true epistemic principles at all.<sup>2</sup>

Although epistemic relativism is not the only position that could benefit from this argument, it is apparent that the conclusion here is one of epistemic relativism's central claims. This becomes especially pressing as epistemic circularity now obstructs our ability to epistemically handle deep disagreements. That said, there is still room for other rational solutions. A prominent alternative is adopting a practical strategy. “After all, the root issue at the heart of an epistemic disagreement — that which makes the dispute an ‘epistemic’ one — is the question of which methods we ought to *employ*. What we want is a reason for

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<sup>1</sup> We will revisit this point from Carter's perspective later.

<sup>2</sup> Lynch, "Epistemic Circularity," p. 269. The second premise is changed from “the best explanation” to “one possible explanation” to fit the argumentation. Note that Lynch is *against* epistemic relativism (along with non-factualism). He claims that “once one understands what it means to give an epistemic reason, the epistemic irresolvability of *deep* epistemic disagreements is just what one should expect.” (ibid., p. 272.) However, this does not decisively exclude the possibility of epistemic relativism.

employing one method over another. That's a practical matter."<sup>1</sup> So, according to Lynch's suggestion, the problem of epistemic incommensurability can be reframed as a practical problem. Nevertheless, this is also an issue intimately bounded to epistemic affairs, therefore it should be referred to as an issue of *epistemic practicality*.<sup>2</sup> This aspect of Lynch's reasoning is particularly noteworthy: genuine disagreements may be addressed in an epistemically practical manner, rather than a purely epistemic way. Realizing this, readers might recall that the discussions of the Pyrrhonian argument and the disagreement argument have already demonstrated that epistemic relativism is at least as practically useful as skepticism.

Drawing on the discussions presented above, an argument for epistemic relativism from epistemic incommensurability can be developed, starting with the perplexing phenomenon of epistemic circularity:

- (A') None of us can escape epistemic circularity once we attempt to justify our epistemic norms/standards/principles/..., so epistemic incommensurability is ultimately irresolvable.
- (B') We are normatively required to try to justify our epistemic norms/standards/principles/..., hence we should be aware of this problem, and it is a problem that needs to be solved.
- (C') Since epistemic circularity is unavoidable, we ultimately cannot justify our epistemic norms/standards/principles/... in a purely epistemic way. Therefore, there will be no theoretically correct way to solve the problem, and we must look to other kinds of solutions. In this situation, a theoretically unjustified but epistemically practical approach is at least one plausible choice, and epistemic relativism is at least one of the qualified candidates of this kind.

(A'), (B'), and (C') are better connected than (A), (B), and (C). First, instead of focusing on disputes over epistemic norms/standards/principles/... that are held by different people, an incommensurability argument, put cautiously, attempts to show that once we try to prove our own epistemic status, we inevitably end up encountering epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

circularity, and our self-vindication would be found epistemically inert. Compared to the Pyrrhonian arguments, this argumentative strategy is more effective at getting to the root of the irreconcilability problem and explaining why incompatibility or incommensurability occurs. It also addresses the possibilist problem — viz., the scarcity of actual dialogues supporting Hales’s judgment that irresolvable disagreements exist and a solution to them is awaited, which would render the practical need of handling disagreements less pressing (and thus less motivating for us to embrace epistemic relativism) — and leads to (B’), demanding a response to the difficulties. The reason is that self-justification is what we are normatively expected to do, so the inevitable outcome of it, even without being foretold, cannot be simply dismissed or ignored. However, unlike in (B), we realize that epistemic circularity is unavoidable, rendering an epistemic solution to the problem unattainable, hence leading to (C’). Nevertheless, this also makes it apparent that the solution does not have to be theoretically correct. In this light, the gap problem is eliminated, and epistemic relativism can be embraced as an epistemically practical solution worth considering for addressing the incommensurability problem.

As the problems of being merely possible and being unable to close the gap are addressed, there remains one challenge to the aforementioned arguments that we have seen unsettled: the problem of finding no good reason to prefer epistemic relativism over skepticism. This, on the one hand, differentiates the incommensurability argument from a Jamesian argument, as epistemic relativism is not yet forced to be the truth. On the other hand, it creates an opportunity for the version of epistemic relativism stemming from this line of argument to avoid what Siegel considers the “fundamental difficulty facing the relativist”:

[I]nsofar as she is taking issue with her non-relativist philosophical opponent, the relativist wants both (a) to offer a general, non-relative view of knowledge (and/or truth or justification), and assert that that general view — i.e., that knowledge is relative — is epistemically superior and preferable to its rivals; and also (b) to deny that such a general, non-relative view is possible or defensible. [...] But the mutual embrace of (a) and (b) is logically incoherent. For the embrace of (a) forces the rejection of (b): if relativism is the epistemically superior view of knowledge — i.e., (a) — then one general view of knowledge is both possible and defensible as epistemically superior to its rivals — contrary to (b). Similarly, the embrace of (b) forces the rejection of (a): if no general, non-relative view of knowledge is possible

or defensible — i.e., (b) — then it cannot be that relativism is itself epistemically superior to its rivals — (a).<sup>1</sup>

What Siegel shows is essentially a localized version of the self-refutation problem of inserting “the principle of translation” faced by global relativism. However, assuming that no general view of knowledge is ultimately epistemically justifiable, as long as epistemic relativists refrain from claiming an “epistemically superior and preferable” status for their own position and adopt a defensive strategy aimed at only showing why their approach is the most favorable one for handling epistemically practical issues, especially epistemic incommensurability and genuine disagreements, their theories are immune to challenges like this one, even though Siegel among others consider it to be a severe difficulty. Of course, even if this approach is sensible, there is still one more step before declaring the plausibility of epistemic relativism — that is, to demonstrate its advantageous epistemic practicality.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. New Arguments for Epistemic Relativism

In the last section, we examined closely some of the prevalent arguments for epistemic relativism and concluded that the essence of these so-called traditional arguments is to invoke the demand for producing a practical solution to certain difficult epistemic phenomena as a reason to call upon epistemic relativism. In Paul Boghossian’s words, they rely on two assumptions:

First, that in evaluating an epistemic system there is no alternative but to use some epistemic system or other. And second, that there is no interesting notion of justification that will allow us to justify a form of reasoning through the use of that very form of reasoning.<sup>3</sup>

While this motivation established on practical need seems appealing, traditional arguments are troubled by their inability to offer theoretical justification. To theoretically

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey Siegel, “Epistemological Relativism: Arguments Pro and Con,” in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven Hales (Wiley Blackwell, 2011), pp. 203–04.

<sup>2</sup> Qualifiers like “more” or “the most” are intentionally avoided here.

<sup>3</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 83.

demonstrate epistemic relativism, one might intuitively start in a metaphysical context, assuming the simultaneous coexistence of multiple, distinct epistemic norms, principles, standards, etc., and then attempt to prove this assumption. However, as Carter and other philosophers point out, such a demonstration is not provided, and challenges against epistemic relativism are thus raised. Fortunately, our examination indicates that any claim asserting the reliability of our epistemic foundations is fundamentally flawed due to epistemic circularity. This flaw not only impacts the revelation of the metaphysical fact of epistemic relativism but also its challengers' stances. Therefore, epistemic relativists, particularly those advocating the argument from epistemic circularity-incommensurability, might be excused for not explaining why epistemic relativism is the theoretically correct position. Yet, they still need to demonstrate why epistemic relativism is preferable to other options, especially skepticism.

Fortunately, along with the metaphysical construal in demonstrating relativism, there often comes the semantic construal, based on the idea that the truth-value of epistemic claims is relative to a set of epistemic standards, practices, or other suitable parameters.<sup>1</sup> Although it is a natural inclination for defenders of semantic relativism to also support metaphysical relativism, these two interpretative approaches are mutually independent. In other words, the semantic construal of relativism does not entail the metaphysical construal of relativism, and *vice versa*.<sup>2</sup> Taking this into account, a semantic construal of epistemic relativism may reinforce traditional arguments to illustrate why epistemic relativism is practically more advantageous than other positions, while safely maintaining “strategic silence” on any metaphysical commitments, thereby avoiding any relevant accusation.

How would a semantic construal of epistemic relativism exhibit its epistemic practicality? Consider skepticism for comparison: Despite being regarded by some philosophers as a rational choice, skepticism is seldom employed by ordinary people in their daily lives — people rarely question their own cognitive abilities, and skepticism is

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<sup>1</sup> This phrasing is adapted from Isidora Stojanovic, "Metaethical Relativism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, ed. Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett (Routledge, 2017), p. 119. Note that Stojanovic was originally talking about metaethical relativism.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126. For example, a semantic relativist may retain “strategic silence” as a global expressivist (Huw Price, "The Semantic Foundations of Metaphysics," in *Minds, Ethics, and Conditionals: Themes from the Philosophy of Frank Jackson*, ed. Ian Ravenscroft (Oxford University Press, 2009).).

rarely used to explain linguistic data in epistemic discourse. The phenomenon that our epistemic activities continue with skepticism seldom, if ever, coming to mind in practical situations suggests that it is less likely to be practically helpful. In contrast, if it can be shown that epistemic relativism is commonly invoked as a practical solution to genuine disagreements, either through reflection on everyday conversations or by comparing its explanatory power regarding our epistemic language with other theories, epistemic relativism could be seen as viable due to its tacit acceptance. As Carter recognizes, it is feasible to reason from this standpoint:

[R]easoning from semantic and pragmatic evidence about disagreement *patterns*, much more generally, to the conclusion th[at] a relativist semantics (in certain domains where we find such disagreements) best explains our practices of attributing certain terms.<sup>1</sup>

That said, before proceeding, it is important to clarify the usage of “practical” and “pragmatic.” I have previously outlined what is meant by “theoretical,” “epistemic,” and “practical.” Technically, in this dissertation, “practical” is not specifically differentiated from “pragmatic” in the Jamesian sense, where the pragmatic is methodologically connected to the practical:

The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. [...] The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle.<sup>2</sup>

This is also why “A Jamesian Approach” was introduced directly under the heading of sub-subsection 2.2.1 without extra explanation. After all, a pragmatic story is often perceived as “couched in terms of know *how* practical abilities to respond differentially to nonlinguistic stimuli, and to distinguish in practice what inferentially follows from or

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922), p. 45.



serves as a reason for what.”<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, “practical” is, of course, not exactly the same as “pragmatic.” As some readers may have noticed in the discussion of pragmatic encroachment, “pragmatic” is not only contrasted with “epistemic”, but also, by conveying certain contextual or agential information, contrasted with a standardly invariant or context-free and user-free way of interpreting the targeted proposition.<sup>2</sup> This subtle difference becomes more conspicuous in the comparison between “semantics” and “pragmatics,” e.g., in the passage quoted from Carter above. Although semantics and pragmatics both concern language in practice, the former is typically understood as the study of the meaning of words and sentences themselves, while the latter focuses more on the meaning of words and sentences within context, particularly influenced by the speaker’s intentions, attitudes, etc. Certainly, pragmatics should not be confused with pragmatism, and for most people, they are only historically related.<sup>3</sup> However, the word “practical” is not quite used in a similar way to this. A possible interpretation of this intuitive word choice might be that what is practical is less context-dependent or agent-dependent than what is pragmatic — suggesting that there are more concrete normative requirements for what is supposed to be practically carried out, while the requirements for pragmatic expressions are more loosely set. Due to space constraints, this topic will not be further pursued here, but it is somehow related to the main task of this dissertation and thus worth mentioning.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Brandom, "The Centrality of Sellars's Two-Ply Account of Observation to the Arguments of Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 103. I am employing Brandom’s phrasing solely for its utility in this context, despite his interpretation of pragmatism not being the sole version available.

<sup>2</sup> This phrasing presents a risk of misinterpretation, which I prefer to avoid if the core concept can be conveyed through alternative means.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the evolution of the term “pragmatics,” see, for example, Catherine Legg, "A Properly Pragmatist Pragmatics : Peircean Reflections on the Distinction between Semantics and Pragmatics," *Pragmatics Cognition* 27, no. 2 (2020): pp. 387–88, <https://doi.org/10.1075/pc.20005.leg>.

<sup>4</sup> At least three issues immediately relevant to both our current discussion and the broader inquiry into wisdom come to mind: First, the distinction between the practical and the pragmatic might extend to the philosophy of action’s distinction between Reason and reasons for action. For instance, Christine Korsgaard, "Acting for a Reason," in *Philosophy of Action: An Anthology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Constantine Sandis (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015). A comprehensive theory of wisdom should illuminate how to act wisely, thus intersecting with this distinction and being applicable in that domain. However, delving into this topic is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Second, following thinkers like Legg (Legg, "Properly Pragmatist

### 3.1 Replacement Relativism

Let us return to the issue of how epistemic relativism might better explain our assignment of epistemic properties, such as epistemic justification, warrant, and entitlement. A potential challenge, rather than a response, to this consideration is: Why should we reassess our practice of attributing these properties? Aren't we confidently ascribing them to epistemic agents in everyday life? Furthermore, this practice is typically conducted without involving any qualifiers. This absence seems to suggest that relativist qualifiers like "relative to" are also missing in common epistemic language, raising questions about the utility of epistemic relativism in understanding our epistemic discourse. Interestingly, epistemic relativists might readily acknowledge this absence of relativist elements. Yet, they might argue that the common interpretation of this phenomenon, or more precisely, the conventional semantics of our epistemic language which does not incorporate a relativist understanding, is flawed (or not fully accurate, to be less "mean-spirited"<sup>1</sup>). Therefore, it should be *replaced* by relativist semantics. This proposal can be understood through an example from physics:

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Pragmatics."), clarifying the relationship between pragmatism and pragmatics is not only a valuable exploration in itself but also a project to demonstrate pragmatics' fundamental status over semantics from a pragmatist viewpoint. This contrasts with the common belief that understanding a sign's meaning precedes its usage. Such a perspective supports my process theory of wisdom, viewing wisdom as "still in the process of making," as James puts it, rather than "ready-made and complete" (William James, "The Absolute and the Strenuous Life," *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 4, no. 20 (1907): p. 547, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2011597>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2011597>. Also cited in John Dewey, "What Does Pragmatism Mean by Practical?," *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 5, no. 4 (1908): p. 86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2011894>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2011894>.) This suggests that our epistemological exploration of wisdom is deeply linked to the philosophy of language, a connection that, again, falls outside the immediate scope of my objectives here. The third issue, related but more confined to our focus, will be addressed later in this dissertation: In John Dewey's interpretation, pragmatism "insists that general notions shall 'cash' in as particular objects and qualities in experience; that 'principles' are ultimately subsumed under facts, rather than the reverse; that the empirical consequence rather than the *a priori* basis is the sanctioning and warranting factor. But all of these ideas are colored and transformed by the dominant influence of experimental science: the method of treating conceptions, theories, etc., as working hypotheses, as directors for certain experiments and experimental observations." (ibid.). This understanding is helpful in encouraging the acceptance of the approach that I am advocating.

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), p. 4.

- (a) For the purposes of assigning truth conditions, a judgment of the form, *the mass of X is M* has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to spatio-temporal framework F the mass of X is M*.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity, physical magnitudes such as mass, length, and temporal duration should be defined in relation to variable frames of reference. An object, for instance, does not possess a single, absolute mass; instead, it has varying mass relative to specific spatio-temporal frameworks. Consequently, there is no privileged framework to ascertain the “true” mass of an object — mass is always relative to a particular framework. Therefore, a judgment about an object’s mass must specify a coordinate system for the judgment to be accurate. Without this relativistic element, such a judgment is either false or incomplete. Understandably, this concept was unknown to our ancestors, who likely perceived mass as an absolute property, leading to the use of “mass” without the “relative to” qualifier. This historical usage, while lacking in scientific precision, still conveyed useful information about an object’s mass relative to the most prominent framework for the observers. Today, however, in the wake of Einstein’s revelations and widespread education, individuals seeking a scientific worldview may need to reinterpret the meaning of the word “mass” inherited from their forebears. They are expected to replace the traditional absolutist view behind those outdated elliptical, if not ignorant, judgments of objects’ mass *simpliciter* with the relativist view, as it aligns more with the developed understanding of the world. In other words, although it is still permissible to use the term “mass” without qualifications, leaving the superficial wording of public discourse about mass remain intact, it is rational to interpret it in a relativist way.

Gilbert Harman suggests that moral relativism could be modeled similarly. It is feasible to apply this approach to not only epistemic relativism, but possibly also other domains of discourse. After all, as Martin Kusch notes, “[r]eplacement relativism is the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. Note: The items in this list will be referenced throughout the following sub-subsections of this subsection.

main *semantic* strategy for making sense of philosophical forms of relativism.”<sup>1</sup> An application to epistemic relativism might be as follows:

- (b) For the purposes of assigning truth conditions, a judgment of the form, *the epistemic property of epistemic agent S is EP*, has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to epistemic framework EF the epistemic property of epistemic agent S is EP*.

Following Boghossian, let us take epistemic justification as a representative instance of epistemic properties (and use epistemic systems instead of epistemic frameworks as the parameter<sup>2</sup>):

- (c) For the purposes of assigning truth conditions, a judgment of the form, *epistemic agent S is justified in believing a proposition P*, has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to epistemic standard ES epistemic agent S is justified in believing a proposition P*.

Is (c) a plausible adaptation from (a)? Several points need to be clarified before we give a final answer.

### 3.1.1 Initial Considerations on Replacement Relativism

There seem to be two points that might immediately raise doubts against Harman’s replacement model, or at least its application in our context: First, the validity of (a) relies on the scientific finding that physical magnitudes are always relative without exception. Specifically, “mass” is dyadic, rather than monadic as commonly thought. This premise is crucial to note because, for epistemic relativism to be formulated in the same fashion as (a), we need a parallel structure or close resemblance between the concepts of mass and epistemic justification. On the surface, (a) and (c) both suggest a compromise between

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Kusch, "Epistemic Replacement Relativism Defended," in *EPSA Epistemology and Methodology of Science: Launch of the European Philosophy of Science Association*, ed. Mauricio Suárez, Mauro Dorato, and Miklós Rédei (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2010), p. 165.

<sup>2</sup>As readers may have noticed, I have not been making strict distinctions between terms like epistemic standards, systems, norms, frameworks, principles, etc. This is because I do not find such distinctions crucial for the purposes of this discussion, though it is acknowledged that these terms do carry different meanings.

updating our understanding in light of scientific progress while respecting ordinary language use. However, the acceptability of (a) essentially hinges on the metaphysical prerequisite concerning the dyadic nature of physical magnitudes. As Harman himself observes, “[m]oral relativism does not claim that moral differences by themselves entail moral relativism, any more than Einstein claimed that differences in opinion about simultaneity by themselves entailed relativistic physics.”<sup>1</sup> By contrast, in our discussion, the metaphysical aspects of epistemic justification are no longer central. Even though epistemic relativism may still be considered a plausible solution to epistemic incommensurability and its resulting genuine disagreement, the insufficiency of definitively supporting evident significantly weakens the analogy between (a) and (c).

Second, even with supportive facts, the replacement approach might not be ideal, for (a) itself may be less convincing than Harman assumes. At first glance, adding qualifiers to a non-relational judgment of mass seems to be an improvement, intending to avoid unfairly accusing those who do not relativize mass of systematic error by enhancing the quality of the belief held by people. However, one might wonder whether this method truly honors the essence of the original judgment. In fact, it feels like this approach merely circumvents the core issue. After all, we might have to admit that the original judgments were not true enough before rendering them true. More importantly, this strategy diverges significantly from typical interpersonal interactions. Consider a scenario in a bakery, where a customer asks the assistant:

- “Do you know the mass of this cake?”
- “It weighs two pounds.”
- “You mean the mass of it is two pounds?”
- “I guess so?”
- “But what you said is false or incomplete. In order to make what you just said true, let me be charitable and complement your sentence with a phrase specifying the coordinate system that the mass is relative to.”

Such a conversation is unusual and potentially disrespectful. Nevertheless, even if the customer chooses a more thoughtful approach and avoids correcting the attendant in

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<sup>1</sup> Harman and Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, p. 18.

public, a response like this formed in her mind can still be deemed absurd. The primary issue here is not just about deviating from standard conversational manner, but about how it does not fit into how our epistemic discourse typically works. Suppose that the conversation continues, and the customer explains to the attendant:

- “What you actually mean is the mass of this cake in relation to earth’s current gravity is two pounds.”
- “OK, but I didn’t think that much.”
- “Maybe not, but you could have used ‘mass’ in this correct way.”
- “But I don’t see anything incorrect in my use of ‘mass’.”

Indeed, people’s everyday use of language does not need to be scientifically accurate to make sense. Even if ordinary language turns out to be inaccurate in a scientific context, this does not imply that people should modify their linguistic practice to fit a scientific standard. As Harman himself acknowledges:

In the dispute between Galileo and Bellarmine as to whether the earth moves, the dispute seems explicitly to presuppose that there is such a thing as absolute motion and rest and to concern whether the earth is absolutely at rest. So, in that particular case we might count them both wrong because of this false presupposition. Or we might count Galileo as right because we see him as “more right” than Bellarmine.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, if someone holds an incorrect opinion and we value knowing the truth for its own sake, then acknowledging a mistake is essential for advancing to a better epistemic status, whether or not one actually takes this step. Therefore, the approach in (a) — making an initially untrue judgment true by adding a specification not originally intended by the speaker — is not necessarily the best strategy. This suggests that it does not automatically justify other theories adopting a similar model.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Harman, “Moral Relativism Explained,” in *Problems of Goodness: New Essays in Metaethics*, ed. Bastian Reichardt (Routledge, forthcoming). Note that Harman insists that “moral relativism is not a theory about the content of [ordinary moral] judgments. Similarly, the relativity of motion or mass or simultaneity does not entail that ordinary judgments about these topics are mistaken.” (ibid.) However, Harman’s stance on ordinary moral judges might be somewhat inconsistent. See the following footnote for my view on this issue.

<sup>2</sup> The debate on whether “the scientific picture of the world replaces the common-sense picture” is controversial. Some, particularly philosophers and scientists, might argue that “the common-sense world of physical objects in Space and Time is unreal — that is, that there are no such things.” On the other hand, it also seems incorrect (or even crazy) to “brain-wash existing populations and train them to speak differently.” (Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp.

### 3.1.2 Further Critique of Replacement Relativism

It would be beneficial to discuss the case of motion before delving into further critique faced by replacement relativism. This is particularly pertinent since the two philosophers we are focusing on in this sub-subsection have developed much of their argumentation based on this case. The essence of the motion case is similar to that of the mass case, but it is considered by Kusch as “the paradigm instance”:<sup>1</sup>

Galileo proposed a relativistic thesis in physics. He discovered that motion is relative to a variable frame of reference. Put differently, Galileo recognized that facts about motion are relative facts. The semantics of assertions about motion before Galileo’s discovery can be reconstructed as follows. Sentences like “the ship moves” express the proposition *the ship moves*, and the latter is true, if and only if the ship at issue has the monadic property expressed by “moves”. Galileo showed that there is no such monadic property; thus utterances of the form “x moves” are untrue — they are either false or incomplete. Moreover, Galileo also pointed out that the closest truths in the vicinity of these untruths are relational truths of the form *x moves relative to frame of reference F*. This makes it natural to suggest that Galileo was asking us to change the way we speak: *replace* the non-relativized sentences with relativized ones, and assert only the relational propositions. Finally, Galileo also offered an analysis of what kinds of frames are possible.<sup>2</sup>

As Boghossian remarks, “Harman’s view seems to be that although our concept of motion may just be the concept of a non-relational property, the *property* denoted by that concept is the relational property of moving relative to a reference frame.”<sup>3</sup> In this light,

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81-83.) Sellars’s actual stance on this issue is itself controversial. Due to space constraints, I will not explore this further but note that I tend to interpret Sellars’s “replaces” in an eliminativist sense — a stance that we will encounter shortly. If the common-sense picture should be eliminated by the scientific picture, then understanding relevant facts implies abandoning the old worldview, and it is epistemically impermissible not to do so. If the common-sense picture should not be replaced, or if the two pictures are considered a continuum, then we are not required to attribute serious error to the traditional view; it is a matter of choosing a better or worse, or supererogatory or suberogatory option. But neither interpretation suggests that we should transform the common-sense picture into a scientific one.

<sup>1</sup> Kusch, “Epistemic Replacement Relativism Defended,” p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Boghossian, “What Is Relativism?,” in *Truth and Realism*, ed. Patrick Greenough and P. Michael Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 17. Note that Boghossian contrasts Harman’s view with an alternative branch of relativism development, which interprets ordinary speakers’ assertions of seemingly absolutist sentences as elliptical for relational sentences. While Harman’s proposal focuses on the truth-conditions of characteristic sentences within a given domain, the alternative approach pertains to their

my objections outlined above can be considered as targeting: (i) the alleged existence or knowability of the existence of that *property*, and (ii) the purported process of denoting the *property* by our everyday non-relativist concept. Objection (ii) is partially supported by Boghossian, who contends that apart from the Principle of Charity, there is also the Principle of Humanity. This principle suggests that since “the error involved—of not realizing the need for frames of reference—is certainly rationally explicable,” “we are allowed to impute error in our interpretations of other people.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Boghossian argues: “[I]n any event, I certainly don’t see the justification for applying Charity selectively, only to the truth-conditions but not to the meaning.” After all, our ancestors have held many beliefs that are not true, yet we do not strive to make those beliefs truer than they are.<sup>2</sup>

Boghossian’s argument differs from mine in that he views (a) as a valid move, while (b) or (c) is not. Nevertheless, it seems that so long as we have a reason to embrace objection (ii), the replacement model becomes untenable for epistemic relativism. The reason is that this renders epistemic relativism unlikely to accurately interpret existing epistemic discourse. Therefore, our initial goal to delve into this type of semantic strategy should be sufficiently met, and it might be advisable to refrain from further analysis due to space constraints. However, at this juncture, a deeper exploration of the broader issues surrounding replacement relativism might offer valuable insights. With this in mind, readers may either proceed directly to Subsection 3.2, which discusses another semantic approach supporting epistemic relativism, or continue with this sub-subsection by considering Boghossian’s summary of replacement relativism in the following template:

- (1) “x is P” expresses the proposition *x is P* which is true if and only if x has the monadic property expressed by “P.”
- (2) Because nothing has (or can have) the property P, all such utterances are condemned to untruth.

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underlying propositions. This latter option is problematic because it is implausible to assume that our remarks are intended to be elliptical (a difficulty that will be further elaborated shortly). Harman himself is aware of this issue and thus uses the term “elliptical” cautiously.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



(3) The closest truths in the vicinity are related relational truths of the form:

x is P relative to F

where “F” names some appropriate parameter.

(4) If our P-utterances are to have any prospect of being true, we should not make judgments of the form:

x is P

but only those of the form:

x is P relative to F.

(5) There are the following constraints on the values that F may assume: ...<sup>1</sup>

Boghossian notes that this template is not limited to moral cases but extends to epistemic ones as well. The degree of its applicability hinges on the number of constraints imposed upon F. The focus here, of course, will be on its application to epistemic relativism. However, first, it is essential to understand the three core components of the paradigm instance of replacement relativism — the case of motion: The first component is the metaphysical fact, which we have already recognized as necessary. The second is a recommendation to reformulate our assertions about relational facts, although this suggestion might attract criticism, as previously outlined. This point connects to the third component — the unbounded nature of motion’s relativism. It seems feasible to posit that motion is absolutely relational, but such a stance might not hold in the epistemological context, particularly in light of critiques like Siegel’s. In any case, when applying this template to (c), we derive a version of replacement relativism about epistemic justification, which can be presented as three key theses corresponding to the aforementioned components:

(1') There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies. (Epistemic non-absolutism)

(2') If a person, S’s, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form

“E justifies belief B”

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

as expressing the claim

*E justifies belief B*

but rather as expressing the claim:

*According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B.* (Epistemic relationism)

(3') There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others. (Epistemic pluralism)<sup>1</sup>

A notable aspect of applying this template to epistemic relativism is the inclusion of constraints on relativizing epistemic judgments. This step is crucial as it helps to differentiate relativism from subjectivism, a radical position that we have good reasons to dismiss. Considering epistemic relativists' recommendations, an unrelativized judgment of one's epistemic status, such as:

( $\alpha$ ) Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations.

would be replaced by

( $\beta$ ) Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations relative to a system, Science, that, I, the speaker, accept.<sup>2</sup>

Now, we have a clearer grasp of what epistemic relativism amounts to. However, before we proceed to further discussion on this basis, it is beneficial to mention one more thing — Boghossian's concept of *fictionalism*. Boghossian suggests that our epistemic systems consist of epistemic principles that "specify under which conditions a particular type of belief is justified."<sup>3</sup> For example:

(Observation) For any observational proposition p, if it visually seems to S that p and circumstantial conditions D obtain, then S is prima facie justified in believing p.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 84-85.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

These principles do not appear to be fundamentally different from individual epistemic judgments. For instance:

If it visually seems to Galileo that there are mountains on the moon, then Galileo is justified in believing that there are mountains on the moon.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Boghossian argues that epistemic principles are “just more general versions of particular epistemic judgements.”<sup>2</sup> If this is the case, it implies that, as epistemic judgments are propositional in nature, so are epistemic principles. What follows is that an epistemic system consisting of these propositions establishes its entailment of the epistemic judgments that are supposed to be correct. Recall that according to relativists, there exist multiple alternative epistemic systems. As a result, an epistemic judgment is not universally accepted or prohibited; rather, it is always contingent upon whether it aligns with a particular epistemic system. Drawing an analogy with truths about fictional characters, which are valid only within specific fictive contexts, Boghossian terms “any relativistic view that is characterized by this pair of features—the relativization parameter consists of a set of general propositions and these propositions stand in entailment relations to the target proposition—a *Fictionalist* brand of Replacement Relativism.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Error-Theory Fictionalist Interpretation**

A natural interpretation of replacement relativists’ proposal is that they suggest treating absolutist epistemic judgments as “*uniformly false*,” and “it follows from this central thought that the general epistemic principles which constitute the epistemic systems that we accept must be false too, for they are general propositions of much the same type.”<sup>4</sup> Boghossian seems to be inclined to label this an *Error Theory*.<sup>5</sup> He introduces an immediate problem for this error-theoretical fictionalist replacement relativism (hereafter, ETFRR):

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Boghossian, "What Is Relativism," pp. 23-24.

<sup>4</sup> *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 85-86.

<sup>5</sup> "What Is Relativism," p. 25.

*The acceptance problem.*<sup>1</sup> Remember that an epistemic system consists of generalized epistemic judgments. Since an error-theoretical relativist posits that all propositions within individual epistemic judgments are false, a system formed from these false propositions is also false. The issue emerges when we follow relativists' guidance to replace absolutist epistemic judgments, such as ( $\alpha$ ), with their relativized counterparts due to the original sentences' inherent falsehood: Before we can meaningfully utter a sentence like ( $\beta$ ), we must select and endorse a system that accommodates ( $\alpha$ ). However, recognizing that a system entailing ( $\alpha$ ), which is inherently false, is also inherently false due to the entailment, raises the question of how we can sincerely accept such a system. Essentially, ETFRR seems to suggest that "we abandon making absolute *particular* judgments about what justifies what while allowing us to *accept* absolute *general* judgments about what justifies what."<sup>2</sup> Yet, this stance is evidently inconsistent.

### **Incompleteness-Theoretical Fictionalist Interpretation**

Although directly claiming the replaced judgment's falsehood does not seem to be feasible, as mentioned above, there is another way for a statement to be considered untrue: through claiming that it is incomplete. This posits that the proposition expressed by the target sentence is incomplete and thus "doesn't specify a fully evaluable truth-condition."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, what an epistemic judgment contains is not a complete proposition, but rather a fragment of one, akin to saying "Tom is taller than...."<sup>4</sup> In this light, the process of replacing ( $\alpha$ ) with ( $\beta$ ) becomes a process of complementing ( $\alpha$ ). But does this interpretation, which can be called incomplete-theoretical fictionalist replacement relativism (ITFRR),<sup>5</sup> fare any better than ETFRR? According to Boghossian, the answer is unfortunately negative, and ITFRR faces even more challenges:

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<sup>1</sup> Note that some of these problems raised by Boghossian are referred to with different names compared to Kusch's dubbing for the sake of clarity.

<sup>2</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, pp. 87.

<sup>3</sup> "What Is Relativism," p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> Following Kusch's terminology.

*The acceptance problem.* First, the acceptance problem persists, as it is still “hard to see how anyone could accept a set of propositions he knew to be incomplete.”<sup>1</sup>

*The regress problem.* Furthermore, for incomplete propositions to form epistemic justification, they must first be completed by reference of epistemic systems, and “we would seem to have embarked on a vicious regress in which we never succeed in specifying the conception of epistemic justification which is supposed to constitute a particular community’s epistemic system.”<sup>2</sup>

*The relation problem.* Another problem is that, since both ordinary epistemic judgments and the propositions that constitute epistemic systems are incomplete, they cannot be logically entailed by any epistemic systems. “‘Relative to epistemic system C’, then, must be understood as expressing some non-logical relation that obtains between a belief’s being justified and some epistemic system.” However, it is difficult to accept that such non-logical relations make sense.

### **Other Problems with Fictionalism and Kusch’s Defense of ITFRR**

In addition to the previously discussed issues, both ETFRR and ITFRR face two more significant problems:

*The correctness problem.* In Boghossian’s formulation of replacement relativism, (3’), i.e., the pluralist clause, claims that “there are many possible alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of them is more correct than any of the others.”<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Boghossian argues that even if there were contradictory verdicts on epistemic justification, “[i]f one of them is deemed to say something false, the other will have to be deemed to have said something true.”<sup>4</sup> However, this claim overlooks the possibility that amongst multiple conflicting verdicts, none may be the best all things considered. That said, at this point, one might recall Sankey’s proposal of empirically testing and comparing different epistemic norms. This naturalist approach can effectively

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<sup>1</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

reinforce Boghossian's critique, and it seems challenging for relativists to address how empirical evidence undermines their pluralist claim.

*The normativity problem.* This problem impacts all forms of relativism that adopt the replacement model. Specifically, in Boghossian's moral relativism case:

The judgment:

*It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car*

seems appropriately normative; but the judgment:

*In relation to moral code M, it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car*

seems just to be a logical remark about the relation between two sets of propositions.<sup>1</sup>

What might raise concerns here is that the initial judgment loses its normative force when relativized to a moral code, for "even someone who was in no way motivated to avoid stealing Mark's car could agree with the claim that, in relation to a given moral code, it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car."<sup>2</sup> Since whether accepting the normative requirement does not matter anymore, the relativists' recommendation is "tantamount to our giving up on moral judgments altogether."<sup>3</sup> In Boghossian's treatment of the fictionalist construal of epistemic replacement relativism, he does not directly accuse it of this issue because he already regards epistemic principles as "general *normative* propositions."<sup>4</sup> However, Boghossian remains conscious of the importance of normativity as he asks: "What sort of normative authority over us could an epistemic system exert, once we have become convinced that it is made up of propositions that are uniformly false?"<sup>5</sup> This question poses a serious challenge to ETFRR. Moreover, when this issue is considered in parallel with the acceptance problem, it also suggests a potential flaw in ITFRR's approach to normativity.

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<sup>1</sup> Boghossian, "What Is Relativism," p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 85. My emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

Now, to defend a fictionalist interpretation of replacement relativism, we need to address these key issues first: *the acceptance problem, the regress problem, the relation problem, the correctness problem, and the normativity problem*. Kusch believes that most of these challenges can be overcome with his version of ITFRR.<sup>1</sup> How might this approach, which Boghossian considers even more problematic than ETFRR, offer a convincing resolution? Kusch's first step is to reinterpret Boghossian's distinction between replacement relativism and eliminativism, particularly in the context of applying the replacement strategy in physics versus in philosophy. Boghossian's example in moral relativism serves as an illustration. Consider the following ordinary moral judgment:

*It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car.*

For Boghossian's relativists, this judgment is supposed to be replaced by:

*[It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car] is entailed by moral code M.*

But for his eliminativists, the original judgment should be replaced by:

*Paul stealing Mark's car is wrong-relative-to M.*

Here, analyzing the underlying logical forms of these statements helps differentiate between the two approaches. The transition is from

*x is P*

to either

*(x is P) bears R to S*

or

*x R y.*<sup>2</sup>

In the first case, the predicate "P" represents a monadic property, and the relativization applies to its truth-condition. In the second case, the predicate "P" is completely replaced by a new dyadic property. This raises a question: Why do replacement relativists reject eliminativism? After all, suggesting that the replacement of classical motion judgments with relativized ones aligns more with an eliminativist approach rather than a potentially more charitable strategy does not seem utterly unacceptable. In this light,

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<sup>1</sup> Note that Kusch did not talk about the correctness problem. I am omitting this point for simplicity.

<sup>2</sup> Boghossian, "What Is Relativism," p. 31.

if moral and epistemic relativists are to follow the paradigm of motion, this might also be the outcome of their adoption of the replacement method.

Boghossian's stance on this is subtle. He insists that moral and epistemic judgments need to be normative, thereby disfavoring eliminativism in these areas. However, his attitude towards scientific cases is not uniform. He believes that examples like substituting the concept of phlogiston with oxygen employ an eliminativist approach. Conversely, in cases related to concepts such as motion, what is chosen is replacement relativism. The reason is that he finds it "likely" that there exists "a more general concept, MOTION, itself, neither absolutist nor relativist, such that both the absolutist and the relativistic notions could be seen to be subspecies of it."<sup>1</sup> This assertion could be subject to debate, yet for the sake of argument, let us accept it temporarily and concentrate on how, in Boghossian's view, relativists might withstand criticism. In essence, the proposal here is that identifying something like MOTION can enable replacement relativism to be effective in a given domain. This is precisely what Kusch does next. He posits that "the relativist and absolutist disagree over a *second-order* or *meta*-epistemic issue, and that one can become a relativist without ever having been an absolutist first."<sup>2</sup> He argues that ordinary people<sup>3</sup> within an epistemic community may make epistemic judgments without committing to specific second-order epistemological standpoints. These individuals, neither absolutists nor relativists, can still make competent epistemic judgments that are recognized and valued within their community. Therefore, in epistemological contexts, the distinction between an ordinary person, an absolutist, and a relativist, does not essentially lie in their first-order epistemic judgments or the epistemic systems derived from these judgments, but in their *post hoc* commitments to specific second-order epistemological positions.

Boghossian suggests that for a set of absolute judgments to be effectively replaced by relational judgments, they must fulfil the requirement of intimacy. In other words, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Kusch, "Epistemic Replacement Relativism Defended," p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Kusch defines "ordinary person" as "a man or woman who is competent user of epistemic language, who participates routinely in epistemic discourse, and whose actions and beliefs are judged in various epistemic dimensions by others." (ibid., p. 169.)



two sets of judgments in question must be “sufficiently *intimately* related to each other.”<sup>1</sup> Kusch finds that the relationship between straightforward first-order epistemic judgments and those same judgments with added second-order gloss meets this criterion. Thus, Kusch’s approach diverges from Boghossian’s by focusing on how unrelativized propositions can be connected to their relativized counterparts through various types of second-order addition. The crux of this approach could be summarized as follows:

True, the particular epistemic judgements and general epistemic principles of the ordinary person are — in the eyes of my relativist — incomplete insofar as they do not express the thought that ours is just one of many equally valid epistemic systems. This incompleteness is not like *Tom is taller than . . .*. In our case what is needed to effect the completion is the addition of a specific meta-epistemic philosophical gloss. However, the absence of this specific complement does not leave behind a meaningless torso of words or concepts: it leaves behind the very principle to which the relativist — insofar as he too has been an ordinary person all along — has been, and continues to be committed.<sup>2</sup>

The gist of Kusch’s proposal is his differentiation between first-order and second-order incompleteness. Kusch argues that Boghossian has mistakenly “collapsed the two forms of incompleteness into one,”<sup>3</sup> though in Kusch’s view, Boghossian himself seems to acknowledge their distinction in other contexts.<sup>4</sup> Since a concept exists in actual epistemic discourse that serves a function similar to that of MOTION in physics, we can defend epistemic relativism by adopting the logical structure used in supporting physical replacement relativism. Therefore, if the physical case stands, the epistemic case should be equally viable.

Kusch’s response is intriguing and potentially groundbreaking as “one of the more important contributions to the recent epistemic relativist literature.”<sup>5</sup> However, I remain

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<sup>1</sup> Boghossian, “What Is Relativism,” p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Kusch, “Epistemic Replacement Relativism Defended,” pp. 171-72.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 83. Although Kusch does not explicitly reference it, he seems to be alluding to Boghossian’s concession regarding the possibility that “relativism is justified by a set of principles that are endorsed by relativists and non-relativists alike.” This interpretation is inferred from the two relativist assumptions outlined at the start of this section, which are used to dismiss the radical subjectivist interpretation of relativism.

<sup>5</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 147.

skeptical about its effectiveness. His argument hinges on two significant assumptions. The first is the existence of a general concept of motion (MOTION), which encompasses both absolutist and relativistic notions of motion. My contention, as previously discussed, questions whether this depiction accurately reflects the evolution of our understanding of “motion.” Carter notes that Kusch’s argument operates as “overarching *modus tollens* — *viz.*, that epistemic replacement (as a semantic strategy) relativism is objectionable only to the extent that it is also objectionable in the physical case (where it clearly isn’t objectionable).”<sup>1</sup> Yet, if physical replacement relativism turns out to be flawed, the argument also fails. Furthermore, even if physical replacement relativism is sound, it is established on a robust metaphysical foundation, a requirement not evidently fulfilled in Kusch’s account. Although Kusch makes the assumption that a concept parallel to MOTION exists within our epistemic discourse, he himself acknowledges that he “cannot make a conclusive case for this view of the ordinary person. To do so would be to conduct, and present the results of, an extensive empirical investigation.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Kusch’s argument heavily relies on personal intuition and experience. This subjective basis may not be accepted universally, and even it is, it needs to be proved with strong evidence from fields like psychology or cognitive science.<sup>3</sup>

Another challenge comes from Carter. As he points out, granted that Kusch’s interpretation accurately reflects how ordinary people form epistemic judgments, “even though first-order epistemic judgments don’t aspire to absolute truth, they nonetheless aspire to truth (which is why epistemic relativists talk as though some first-order judgments

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Kusch, “Epistemic Replacement Relativism Defended,” p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> “[...] according to my own experience of epistemic discussions with untrained students, when pressed on their stance vis-à-vis the relativism-absolutism opposition, they find it hard to come up with a straightforward answer. This does not of course suggest that philosophically untrained people are epistemic relativists; what it does indicate instead is that being introduced people are epistemic relativists; what it does indicate instead is that being introduced to, and becoming competent in, the practice of epistemic discourse does not involve deciding between epistemic absolutism and relativism. Most of our epistemic discourse functions in ways that do not bring this meta-epistemic alternative into view. And hence ordinary persons tend not to be committed either way.” (ibid.) An immediate issue with this comment is that it overlooks the possibility of people committing to something unknowingly. A more substantial challenge to this point will be discussed when Carter’s account of metaepistemic commitment is introduced in Chapter 3.

are true).”<sup>1</sup> In other words, an epistemic judgment regarding truth is typically accompanied by a second-order rationale, even if this rationale is only implicitly acknowledged. Considering these challenges, the viability of Kusch’s defense of epistemic relativism remains uncertain unless these concerns are addressed.

### **Non-Fictionalist Interpretation and the Quasi-Absolutist Approach**

Although the fictionalist interpretation does not seem to be satisfactory, this does not preclude other forms of epistemic replacement relativism. An alternative approach is to view epistemic systems not as sets of normative propositions, but rather “as sets of *imperatives*—not as *claims* to the effect that E justifies B, but as *commands* of the form: If E, believe B!”<sup>2</sup> While Boghossian also dismisses this approach, it nevertheless provides a fascinating lens through which we can re-examine the phenomena that we are seeking to understand theoretically. Recall that this sub-subsection was extended aiming to uncover more nuanced insights — venturing into this imperative perspective is a crucial step in that direction. However, before we explore these intriguing complexities, it is crucial to first acknowledge and address the challenges that this perspective faces.

Boghossian recognizes that interpreting replacement relativism as a set of imperatives might circumvent some criticisms directed at fictionalism. However, he questions whether “the proposal on offer is workable.”<sup>3</sup> First, Boghossian believes that, if we read “If E, believe B” as an imperative, namely, a command, it should be understood as requiring that given E, believe B. However, ordinary statements like “If E, believe B.” merely permit, rather than command, the belief in B given E. Second, Boghossian finds it necessary to have an account of what makes a system of imperatives *epistemic*, as opposed to moral or pragmatic ones. Yet, “no such account has ever been provided and none seems forthcoming.”<sup>4</sup> Lastly, *the normativity problem* arises again. According to Boghossian, the

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 155. Carter refers to this as the vindication thesis. While I find his terminology useful, it originates from a different context, specifically a discussion about whether this thesis, combined with epistemic relativists’ non-absolutist clause, results in epistemic relationism. (These are two of the three central clauses outlined by Boghossian.)

<sup>2</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

suggestion to replace an absolutist judgment like ( $\alpha$ ) with a relativized one like ( $\beta$ ), where the chosen epistemic system (e.g., Science) now comprises imperatives in the form of “If E, then believe B,” leads to something that can only be superficially analyzed as follows:

According to the system of imperatives that we accept, if certain observations have been made, then believe Copernicanism.<sup>1</sup>

Once again, the issue is that it “seems to be a purely factual remark about what imperatives we accept and a purely logical remark about what they require.”<sup>2</sup> In Boghossian’s view, such a transformation of ( $\alpha$ ) into ( $\beta$ ) does not genuinely address the underlying normative aspect of epistemic judgments. Indeed, ( $\beta$ ) seems so distinct from ( $\alpha$ ) that it appears to do more than just replace it; it effectively eliminates ( $\alpha$ ) and occupies its position.

Boghossian contends that these concerns could undermine the imperative interpretation. However, it quickly becomes apparent that at least the first two issues may not be as severe as Boghossian suggests. The second problem, in particular, is less threatening in our context, since we have already discussed how an issue that is epistemically practical remains closely relevant to epistemology. Therefore, epistemic imperatives could legitimately be part of epistemic discourse. Regarding the first problem, Boghossian’s view may be somewhat oversimplified. On the one hand, a non-fictionalist interpretation does not necessarily lead us to understand judgments as imperatives in all cases. On the other hand, in everyday conversations, we do often employ moral or epistemic terminology merely to express our approval or disapproval of someone’s actions; yet this does not rule out the potential for judgments to function as commands. In fact, it is quite conceivable how, through appropriate linguistic actions, moral and epistemic judgments can serve both as commands and as permissions.

This response relates to a solution to the third problem, which might initially appear intractable, as even Kusch acknowledges that “[t]he problem is real,”<sup>3</sup> implying that while his version of ITFRR might resolve other issues, the normativity problem remains and

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kusch, “Epistemic Replacement Relativism Defended,” p. 173.

requires additional steps to address. That said, he also notes that “relativists have not only been aware of [this problem], they have even addressed it at some length. One intriguing proposal is to combine relativism with a form of emotivism or ‘quasi-absolutism.’”<sup>1</sup> Despite Boghossian’s skepticism regarding the existence of concepts similar to “motion” in areas like ethics and epistemology, which casts doubt on the applicability of the replacement relativist proposal in these fields, and my own reservations about Kusch’s method of addressing this challenge, the quasi-absolutist solution may nonetheless merit consideration.

It is difficult to define normativity precisely,<sup>2</sup> but what Boghossian means here is essentially that if we accept a normative background (against which the judgment is made), we will then approve or disapprove of an action according to the rules or requirements of that background. However, a relativized judgment would be agreed upon by everyone, regardless of whether the normative framework supporting that judgment is accepted. Therefore, a relativistic judgment seems to lack the normative force that an epistemic or moral judgment typically possesses. Nevertheless, while this attitudinal distinction is indeed a potential issue, Harman has already acknowledged it,<sup>3</sup> as he writes:

People who accept different moral frameworks typically have conflicting affective attitudes. One person may wish to end the practice of raising animals for food, another may be in favor of that practice. In some sense, they disagree with each other, but moral relativism does not appear to provide them with any easy way to express their disagreement. Each agrees that raising animals for food is wrong relative to the first moral framework, and that raising animals for food is not wrong relative to the second.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Finlay, "Defining Normativity," in *Dimensions of Normativity: New Essays on Metaethics and Jurisprudence*, ed. David Plunkett, Scott J. Shapiro, and Kevin Toh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). This will be revisited in Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> This problem may be understood as the Disagreement Problem (epistemic agents holding relativized judgments are no longer able to disagree with each other) that Kusch has in mind. He believes that Boghossian fails to mention it. (Kusch, "Epistemic Replacement Relativism Defended," p. 174.)

<sup>4</sup> Harman and Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, p. 32.

From Harman's point of view,<sup>1</sup> what is important is the presence of genuine disagreements among individuals who adhere to different moral frameworks.<sup>2</sup> He believes that even if these individuals adopt relativism, they should still be able to use language to express such disagreements effectively. In response to concerns about the apparent inadequacy of relativism in this regard, Harman introduces emotivism, which is typically characterized by the notion that moral terminology primarily expresses affective attitudes.<sup>3</sup> The simplest form of emotivism "offers a 'Boo! Hurrah! Who cares!' account of the meaning of moral discourse,"<sup>4</sup> whereas a more refined version suggests interpreting moral judgments as imperatives, akin to the imperative approach mentioned by Boghossian.<sup>5</sup> Both forms differ from pure relativism in that they enable the expression of disagreement, though at the cost of denying moral claims any truth-value, for they treat judgments as mere expressions of personal feelings and attitudes. Consequently, emotivism struggles to explain complex judgments like "It is morally wrong to encourage someone to do something that is morally wrong."<sup>6</sup>

The crux of the matter is that while affective attitudes might align with the commonly expected essence of personal moral judgments in direct expressions, they are far less likely to meet such expectations in the context of indirect moral judgments. For instance, when one declares that an action is morally right or wrong in an emotivist manner, listeners may find this perfectly acceptable, but they typically do not perceive this as making an objective judgment of truth or falsehood, nor do they consider it as revealing a fixed moral property attached to the action. However, most people expect moral rightness

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike Boghossian, Harman does not extend his defense of moral relativism to encompass epistemic relativism. However, it is conceivable how his approach might be adapted to suit the needs of epistemic relativists. The question of whether such an adaptation would retain the same level of plausibility is a separate matter, which will be explored in Chapter 3

<sup>2</sup> Note that this attitude is not necessarily connected to genuine disagreements.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1946); Charles L. Stevenson, *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Harman and Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Mervyn Hare, *The Language of Morals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952).

<sup>6</sup> Harman and Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, p. 33.

or wrongness to have objective, cross-contextual stability. For example, in the aforementioned judgment, the second “morally wrong” seems to imply a consistent fact rather than reflecting someone’s prior comment. Considering this, interpreting moral judgments simply as “Boo to encouraging someone to do something that boo to it!” or “Don’t ever encourage someone to do something that don’t ever do!”<sup>1</sup> evidently fails to meet some significant anticipation. Therefore, emotivism seems to miss some key aspects of our moral discourse and is thus inherently flawed.

Some philosophers might contend, perhaps harshly, that this represents the true nature of moral discourse. However, Harman argues, following Richard Mervyn Hare’s lead, that we can address this issue within the framework of emotivism. Central to Hare’s approach is his “use theory of meaning,” which explains expressions’ meaning based on how they are used. In this light, although a relativist moral judgment might not fulfill its traditionally expected role of judging actions against an objective moral standard,<sup>2</sup> it still functions in a similar manner. Harman thus proposes that “it is possible to appeal only to ingredients that are acceptable to a moral relativist in order to construct a way of using moral terminology that mimics the absolutist usage.”<sup>3</sup> This approach can be dubbed as “quasi-absolutism,”<sup>4</sup> suggesting that “a moral relativist projects his or her moral framework onto the world and then uses moral terminology as if the projected morality were the single true morality, while at the same time admitting that this way of talking is

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> I am intentionally avoiding the realism/anti-realism debate and the Frege-Geach problem because Harman’s defense of his relativistic view draws on only certain emotivist elements, and these relevant topics are too complex to be introduced at this point. They will, however, be addressed in Chapter 3. Additionally, it is important to note that Harman’s view on moral facts has evolved. Initially, he maintained that moral facts exist, but that moral beliefs or claims do not seem to explain non-moral facts. Later, he suggested that moral facts “may help to explain certain things, but the relevant moral facts must be relational.” His commitment to moral relativism remains unchanged, but he has shifted from treating it as a linguistic thesis about statements’ logical form to considering it as a form of moral realism. To be more precise, “moral relativism supposes that the relevant relations are real. In that respect it is a version of moral realism.” (Harman, “Moral Relativism Explained.”) For the details, see “Moral Relativism Is Moral Realism,” *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 4 (2015/04/01 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-014-0298-8>.

<sup>3</sup> Harman and Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> This approach is also known as “projectivism” or “quasi-realism”, see Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word: Groundings In the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

only ‘as if.’”<sup>1</sup> Drawing on this, while all moral judgments should be seen as relatively acceptable, we can still meaningfully approve or disapprove of various moral codes.<sup>2</sup> As a result, this approach preserves the essence of disagreement even within a relativist context.

Returning to *the normativity problem*, remember that this remaining issue is not only pressing but also widely applicable. Irrespective of the specific form of replacement relativism adopted, a judgment that is relativized inherently lacks the expected level of certainty or normative force. This issue becomes particularly urgent when one realizes that being aware of a judgment’s relative validity might naturally lead to reduced confidence in its assertion. Now that quasi-absolutism is introduced, we seem to have an approach to effectively address this challenge. However, two complexities in this approach warrant consideration even before assessing its ultimate viability: First, admittedly, this approach hints at a promising direction for developing relativism by functionally mirroring absolutism. In this way, replacement relativists seem potentially able to defend their position by adopting the imperative interpretation. Yet, recall that, while primarily focused on challenges to replacement relativism in ethics and epistemology, especially regarding how it diverges from its application in physics, there is an additional, underlying concern that the so-called paradigmatic application in physics might not be as solid as presumed, for it is not clear why replacement relativism should be preferred over eliminativism even in the context of physics. In other words, the promise of this direction does not stem from its inherent merit but rather because it can draw on the case in physics, which these philosophers seem to take for granted.

This realization brings us to the second point. It is important to note that the crux of this solution is the functional resemblance between relativism and absolutism. Although these two theoretical approaches are distinct in many aspects, relativism is claimed to be plausible when it serves a similar function as absolutism. Previously, it was mentioned that our discussion largely focuses on identifying a theory that plausibly accounts for our epistemic linguistic practices. However, if this aim is taken at face value, some of our discussions appear peculiar. For instance, in our comparison of relativism and absolutism,

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<sup>1</sup> Harman and Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> For a similar view, see David B. Wong, *Moral Relativity* (London: University of California Press, 1984).



the emphasis seems to be more on meeting common expectations rather than substantiating their validity with evidence. If our goal is simply to explain a phenomenon, shouldn't our primary focus be on uncovering objective facts instead of catering to subjective hopes? Similar questions can be raised such as: Why is the debate between eliminativism and relativism not framed more as a discussion about the actual history of language evolution? Or, why is the plausibility of relativism assessed not so much on its accurate depiction of our epistemic discourse, but rather on whether its portrayal aligns with our intuitions? These questions lead to a deeper question: What exactly do we seek from these theoretical accounts? The comparison between relativism and absolutism highlights a deficiency in relativism — specifically, the certainty in asserting judgments with normative force. What matters is not merely what is offered by a theory, but how the content operates. In this light, the crux of the matter appears to be the function of providing certainty, the basic purpose of which is to provide assurance about something. Viewed through this lens, relativism seems to fall short in offering the same level of assurance for judgments about normativity as absolutism does. This observation suggests an underlying assumption in our analysis: that relativism, as a theory accounting for epistemic discourse, is evaluated considering how it matches the effectiveness of a position that fulfills our anticipation of certainty.

These two remarks, although preliminary and potentially contentious, offer significant insights into the quest for a plausible theory accounting for our epistemic linguistic practice, as initially aimed in this supplementary exploration. However, a deeper analysis of these points is not feasible at this stage, since this part is merely ancillary to the main discussion. Besides, considering the second point, it seems essential to first address the concern about the criteria for comparing competing theories before delving into the first remark. After all, once we step outside the confines of implicit standards assumed by the abovementioned philosophers, we might greatly change the way of viewing these issues. In any case, the importance and clarity of these insights will be elaborated upon in subsequent chapters. For the present context, there are two immediate takeaways: For one, within discussions that accept replacement relativism in physics, the application of replacement relativism in ethics and epistemology is not entirely discredited, as a viable approach might still exist through the adoption of an imperative interpretation. For another, our expectation of a plausible epistemological theory is not just any theory that explains

our practice, but one that can offer a certain level of assurance. As will be soon revealed, these two insights are associated respectively with the conclusion of this chapter and one underlying central theme of this dissertation.

### 3.2 New Age Relativism

Before the ancillary extension of the last subsection, a widespread argument for epistemic relativism, or in Boghossian's words, "thoroughgoing relativisms about the epistemic"<sup>1</sup> was rebutted. This description, however, appears somewhat removed from what we are looking for. Why? As discussed earlier, although Kusch (and perhaps also Carter<sup>2</sup>) perceives Harman's replacement model as a semantic strategy of relativism, it requires a metaphysical basis to be effective. In some philosophers' eyes, Harman's proposal is indeed a metaphysical version of relativism.<sup>3</sup> As Harman himself later realized: "Moral relativism is the theory that there is not a single true morality. It is not a theory of what people mean by their moral judgments."<sup>4</sup> And this is what Boghossian targets — a "radical 'postmodern' view which attempts to evade commitment to any absolute epistemic truths of any kind."<sup>5</sup> By contrast, what we seek is not a semantic version of epistemic relativism akin to the classic version found in Rorty's work. Instead, it should be closer to a semantic formulation of a moderate epistemic relativism, suggesting "while there are some absolute epistemic truths, there are many fewer than we had been inclined to suppose, or that they make essential reference to such parameters as a thinker's starting point."<sup>6</sup> Boghossian finds it difficult to understand what would motivate such a moderate view, but tentatively speaking, he has already highlighted a case that might invoke this kind of

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<sup>1</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> When discussing about semantic strategies, Carter mainly looks for an appropriate formulation of epistemic relativism. (Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, ch. 6.)

<sup>3</sup> For example, Stojanovic, "Metaethical Relativism."

<sup>4</sup> Harman, "Moral Relativism Explained."

<sup>5</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

epistemic relativism — the eliminativist view *towards* a relativized epistemic judgment. The idea is that, here, a new perspective is introduced to a given debate of epistemic justification in a less prominent manner. While Boghossian recognizes that relativists pave the way for eliminating the normativity of disputants' disparate epistemic systems, a proper semantic construal of relativism might interpret the elimination as another epistemic judgment that is supposed to be relativized as well:

Relativist semantic theories hold that our indices should include not just a world and (perhaps) a time, but also a *context of assessment*. Just as propositions can have different truth-values with respect to different worlds, so, on this view, they can vary in their truth depending upon features of the conversational setting in which they are considered.<sup>1</sup>

And this, according to Crispin Wright, straightforwardly connects to what he terms New Age relativism, which is, broadly speaking, a form of semantic theory of relativism considered standard in contemporary analytic philosophy. What is interesting about it is the capability it possesses to evade Boghossian's bullet.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2.1 Pros and Cons of New Age Relativism

#### **Avoiding Boghossian's Criticism**

New Age Relativism is a semantic proposal. Its central thesis concerns "the truth-conditions of utterances, where an utterance is an actual historic voicing or inscription of a sentence of a certain type."<sup>3</sup> New Age relativists distinguish between two kinds of contexts that contribute to the truth of one's utterances:

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Speaks, "Theories of Meaning," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2021). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/meaning/>.

<sup>2</sup> Crispin Wright, "Fear of Relativism?," *Philosophical Studies* 141 (2008): p. 379. This dubbing comes from Wright's earlier work "New Age Relativism and Epistemic Possibility: The Question of Evidence," *Philosophical Studies* 17, (special number on *The Metaphysics of Epistemology*, edited by Ernest Sosa and Enrique Villanueva) (2007).

<sup>3</sup> "New Age Relativism," p. 262.

- (i) The context of making the utterances: a series of characterizations of how the utterances are produced — “when, where, to who, by whom, in what language, and so on.”<sup>1</sup>
- (ii) A context of evaluating the utterances: another series of characterizations of how the utterances are assessed, independent of the original context of the utterances’ making and the associated state of the world.

From this differentiation, it follows that even if the context of uttering remains fixed, the truth-value of what is uttered could vary considering different contexts of assessment. The thrust is that claims the replacement relativists try to replace are now regarded not as wrong, incomplete, or imperative, but complete and truth-apt judgments with overt content — there is no need to relativize any parts of the original sentences expressed by the utterers — their truth-values are variable because whether the propositions contained are true is relatively determined by the normative standards of the specified judges. The root idea behind this proposal, traceable to David Kellogg Lewis, is that a parameter can determine whether a sentence is true without being explicitly referred to, just like whether “It is raining.” is true depends on the location, the time, and the world where it is used.<sup>2</sup>

Philosophers have detailed several possible parameters, such as moments of evaluation, the assessor’s information state, saliences and/or stakes in the assessment... and most relevant to Boghossian’s observation: the standards of the assessor. Here, it should be noted that, in a loose sense, everyone could have their own standards, which should not all be considered normative constraints. What Boghossian discusses are standards “conceived as *principles governing evaluation*, rather than *projections of actual patterns* of evaluation, and as subject to no objective notion of correctness.”<sup>3</sup> The most intriguing part of this New Age approach is that it does not align with Boghossian’s formulation of epistemic relativism, specifically, the second clause of his elaboration —

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> David Kellogg Lewis, “Index, Context, and Content,” in *Papers in Philosophical Logic* (United States of America: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Wright, “Fear of Relativism?,” p. 382. The distinction may appear to overlap with the subjectivism versus relativism differentiation that we discussed earlier in this chapter. However, the complexity arises when we delve further into the question of how a subjective standard can be considered true, a topic that will be explored later in this chapter.

epistemic relationism. It suggests that for an epistemic judgment to be true, this judgment must be expressed in a relativistic way. According to Boghossian, the reason compelling an epistemic relativist to take this step is that since they wish to retain the previous epistemic discourse, now unsupported by absolute facts, they are obliged to introduce a relativist fact to shoulder that burden — but why should we expect an epistemic relativist to have such motivation? After all, as argued previously, there is no need to preserve the old discourse if it is truly false. And as Wright sees it, this is “just to fail to take seriously” that a claim “can indeed be true of false, albeit *only relatively so*.”<sup>1</sup> A New Age relativist would not follow Boghossian’s lead — they do not wish to change the content of the utterances in question — the kind of relativization that they aim to make sense of is how utterances receive variable truth-values dependent on the evaluation context.<sup>2</sup> The point is, “assessment-relativism, if it is to be anything coherent, must insist on a sharp separation between the making of a claim that is apt merely for relative truth and the making of the (potentially) absolute claim<sup>3</sup> of the obtaining, in a particular case, of the relative-truth constituting relationship.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course, there remains Boghossian’s criticism of the other two clauses: epistemic non-absolutism, which asserts that there are no absolute facts about the justification relation between an item of information and its corresponding belief, and epistemic pluralism, which claims that there are multiple alternative epistemic systems, each equally correct. Assessment relativism effectively addresses the former clause, but there is some tension

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to understand that a stance like nonindexical contextualism may refute the idea that a sentence’s content varies across contexts and argue that the truth or extension of a sentence is determined by the specific context in which it is used. Yet, it is still different from New Age Relativism. Take, for example, sentences pertaining to aesthetic judgment: their truth might be influenced by the speaker’s changing tastes but is not necessarily dependent on the varying contexts of evaluation. The key distinction lies in the role that assessment contexts play. For a detailed examination of nonindexical contextualism, see MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, pp. 88-92.

<sup>3</sup> This can give rise to the same issue that we previously discussed concerning the introduction of absolute principles into relativist proposals. As Wright points out, “in casting about for acceptable, potentially absolute truth conditions for them to take, it effectively loses sight of the very relativism that it intends to propose.” (Wright, “Fear of Relativism?,” pp. 383-84.) Carter interprets this as a problem related to the insertion of the Principle of Translation (Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 155.). My footnote.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, “Fear of Relativism?,” p. 383.

between it and the latter — *the Acceptance Problem* of ETFRR — where a relativist stance would be compromised if it accepts a proposition entailed by the relativist system as untrue, rather than not absolutely true. Interpreting absolute epistemic claims as semantically incomplete, viz., ITFRR as outlined before, also fails to resolve this issue.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, New Age relativists would argue that these are not their problems, and Boghossian’s criticism applies only to theories that do not fully embrace relativism, as they require some sort of semantic completion to make content relatively truth-evaluable, but not a commitment to contexts of assessment. But is New Age Relativism as robust as its advocates claim, capable of avoiding all of Boghossian’s criticism? According to Wright, if they accept Boghossian’s other characterizations, the answer is negative.

The potential problem with New Age Relativism is that the truth of its own statements of general standards is ultimately reflexive.<sup>2</sup> The reason is that the statements cannot be absolute, but being relative to further standards would lead to infinite regress, leaving self-relativity as the only option. This seems to be unacceptable. It is a common understanding that not all standards are epistemic or moral in nature. People generally anticipate that certain normative force exists and influences the formation of standards within these areas of discourse. However, “if the truth of the statement of a general standard is conceived as consisting in its acceptability relative to the very standard concerned—i.e., in effect, as self-entailment—then every such statement should be accepted as true.”<sup>3</sup> New Age relativists may argue that this is an oversimplified reading of their position, and in practice, they require the standards adopted to be actually accepted in the contexts where the assessment is made. However, this move does not necessarily introduce the kind of constraint that is expected for. Consider the following case:

Let the context be one in which one is so far committed to no view—a case where the epistemic pluralist component in relativism permits one to ‘go either way’. So

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that Boghossian’s second clause of epistemic relativism was initially semantic in nature, while the interpretation of it as incomplete is, in effect, a pragmatic reading. This is because it does not concern the overt claim and does not relativize truth at the propositional content level. (ibid., p. 386.) Additionally, Wright also expresses concern that the imperative interpretation of relativism could potentially lead to global relativism. (ibid., p. 387.)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 388.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

one is rationally free to accept the standard; i.e., to accept the truth of the proposition concerned.<sup>1</sup>

As the epistemic pluralist clause releases the rational constraints on choosing standards, the New Age relativists seem to employ “acceptance” in a surprisingly loose sense, leading to a focus on “truth” as merely a deflationary or minimalist notion. Wright emphasizes that if this is the case, while New Age Relativism can evade Boghossian’s criticism, it inadvertently steers the discussion towards the longstanding debate between realism and anti-realism about normative facts, where its own presence is not fundamentally required. This is an intriguing observation, and we will revisit this point in the next chapter, but first, let us examine what New Age Relativism is “new” about — if what it addresses is indeed not novel.

### **New Age Relativism Defended**

We have been acquainted with the notions of the context of use and different contexts of assessment, which are the two roles that a context plays in semantics.<sup>2</sup> However, this seemingly natural distinction was not always so evident. Before John MacFarlane introduced and defended the idea that truth could also be relativized to a context of assessment, the notion that sentences or propositions could bear this kind of relative truth was rarely recognized. Of course, people have long been aware that some utterances are only correct in relation to certain parameters, especially in cases involving indexical expressions like “here,” “now,” “I,” etc., where the situation of the utterer must be considered to properly understand their meanings.<sup>3</sup> As Max Kölbel remarks, “To hold that it is relative to some parameter whether entities of a certain sort are true is not in itself contentious. It is, for example, widely agreed that the truth of indexical sentence-types is

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> This concept is familiar from David Kaplan, “Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives and Other Indexicals,” in *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Note that while an indexical linguistic expression may convey different content in various contexts, its linguistic meaning (or “character,” as Kaplan terms it, which is fixed conventionally) remains constant. For a more comprehensive introduction to this topic, see David Braun, “Indexicals,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2017 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/indexicals/>.

relative (consider the sentence-type 'I am hungry.')."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, some philosophers argue that the contents of at least some linguistic expressions other than these commonly accepted ones, like epistemic terms such as “know,” are also sensitive to the contexts in which they are made. This view, more controversial in epistemology, is most famously associated with literature on epistemic contextualism or attributor contextualism.<sup>2</sup> However, the common ground shared by contextualism and Harman’s position is notable — if the core idea of replacement relativism is that a sentence can only express truth or falsehood relative to the context in which it is used, does this not fundamentally align relativism with contextualism? It follows that what Harman insists upon and what Boghossian criticizes “is essentially a form of contextualism about terms of moral evaluation.”<sup>3</sup> So, if MacFarlane continued focusing on this aspect of relativism, his approach would not constitute an intriguingly “New Age” relativism. Conversely, MacFarlane finds this characterization of relativism prevalent but unsatisfactory, as it is not philosophically interesting enough. These contextualist-relativists highlight that many people overlook certain conditions contributing to the correctness of our utterances. For example, “It is raining.” is true only when it is raining here in the actual world, but this does not extend beyond asserting that a statement of “It is raining.” is correct when it is indeed raining. They may disagree about which parameters should be considered, but once these parameters are established, the truth-value of the proposition contained is seen as fixed, and thus, in a sense, absolute.<sup>4</sup> MacFarlane is not satisfied with this outcome because he believes that the contextualists’ disputes are confined within the scope of the context of use, while “genuine” relativism, in his view, concerns not just different parameters to which truth is sensitive, but also sensitivity to something else — assessment sensitivity, in

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<sup>1</sup> Max Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Rysiew, "Epistemic Contextualism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2021 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/contextualism-epistemology/>.

<sup>3</sup> MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, p. 33, n. 5.

<sup>4</sup> I have omitted another common but philosophically less interesting form of truth relativization, specifically the technical relativization in Tarski’s recursive definition of truth. For further discussion on this topic, see *ibid.*, pp. 45-46.



addition to use sensitivity.<sup>1</sup> The key dividing line between contextualism and relativism about truth is demarcated by the “commitment to the *assessment sensitivity* of some sentences or propositions.”<sup>2</sup> The point is, if relativists ultimately aim to make sense of relative truth, then relativizing truth to locations, times, agents, worlds, or other kinds of parameters is not groundbreaking — it is not the parameters themselves, but the method of determining the parameters that is crucial.<sup>3</sup>

MacFarlane’s theory is also “new” in analytic philosophy of language due to his pioneering work in formulating the relativist position. He has developed a systematic relativist semantics, drawing from Kaplan and Lewis, that elucidates the explanatory power of relativism in significant cases. According to Kaplan, a context is a possible occasion for using an expression, comprising at least an agent, a time, and a location; the content of a structured proposition is determined with respect to it, but the truth-values of the proposition are further determined with respect to variable circumstances of evaluation, including times, possible worlds, and potentially others.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Lewis defines a context as the time, place, and possible world where an agent produces a sentence; it is a temporal-spatial and logical location, featuring numerous, independently shiftable indices;<sup>5</sup> the truth-value of a sentence is thus determined once and for all with respect to the context. Despite their differences, both agree on the importance of the context in which an expression is uttered when evaluating that expression. This stems from a principle tacitly followed in communication — sentences are used to convey truth, and the truth value of the propositions they express depends on the context, as the same sentence can be true in some contexts and false in others.<sup>6</sup> “So the central semantic fact we need to know if we are to *use* a sentence and understand others’ uses of it is the condition of its truth at a context. Truth at a context is the point at which semantics makes contact with pragmatics,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. vii; pp. 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 52; ch. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Kaplan, "Demonstratives."

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, "Index, Context, and Content," p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 22; MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, p. 59.

in the broad sense—the study of the use of language.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, while semantics is generally about how a linguistic expression is related to its truth-conditions determining its truth-values, the use of that expression significantly influences how this relationship is shaped.<sup>2</sup> Contextualist semantics is a viable position, but MacFarlane seeks further progress, arguing that a distinctively philosophical debate should relate to broader considerations, hence the introduction of assessment sensitivity.<sup>3</sup> The essence of a relativist semantics that accommodates this new sensitivity can be easily grasped based on the context of use. “To move from Lewis’s framework to a framework in which relativist proposals can be described, we need only give contexts of assessment a role in our semantics parallel to that of contexts of use.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, a relativist would assert that the truth of a sentence is dually determined at the context where it is used and at the selected context where it is evaluated. To recapitulate briefly:

**Relativism about truth.** *To be a relativist about truth is to hold that languages with assessment-sensitive expressions are at least conceptually possible.*<sup>5</sup>

Here, it is beneficial to clearly differentiate the act of uttering from the content that is uttered before proceeding. Their distinction is fairly clear: an utterance is essentially a speech act, and actions are typically judged as correct or incorrect, while what is uttered is usually considered true, false, or neither (i.e., not truth-evaluable). If relativists are primarily concerned with the variability of truth, they should focus on the expressed truth-

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<sup>1</sup> *Assessment Sensitivity*, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> This point can be further elucidated by drawing on Michael Dummett’s observation: “Until we have an account of the general point of the classification into true and false we do not know what interest attaches to saying of certain statements that they are neither true nor false; and until we have an account of how the truth-conditions of a statement determine its meaning the description of the meaning by stating the truth-conditions is valueless.” (Michael Dummett, “Truth,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958): p. 144, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4544609>.) And “[t]he roots of the notions of truth and falsity lie in the distinction between a speaker’s being, objectively, *right* or *wrong* in what he says when he makes an assertion.” (*Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. xvii.) The connection between assertion and truth can be understood as our assertoric utterances being constitutively governed by the “**Truth Rule.** *At a context c, assert that p only if p is true at c.*” (MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, p. 101.) For detailed discussion, see *ibid.*, ch. 5.

<sup>3</sup> MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65. It should be noted that this discussion is not centered on whether a natural language, such as English, is assessment-sensitive. Determining that aspect is at least partly an empirical issue.

bearers — primarily propositions,<sup>1</sup> and then sentences that obtain truth-values through their relation to these propositions — rather than the act of expression itself. This distinction is significant because MacFarlane’s relativism about truth is strictly semantic. While it might align with a relativist account of the truth of uttering or asserting, MacFarlane emphasizes that applying a truth predicate to acts would be inappropriate.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, MacFarlane’s relativism about truth focuses exclusively on propositions and linguistic expressions that contain propositions, such as beliefs and assertions. Drawing on Kaplan’s works, we can formulate the following definitions:

- (1) A proposition  $p$  is true as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$  iff  $p$  is true at all circumstances of evaluation compatible with  $\langle c_1, c_2 \rangle$ .<sup>3</sup>
- (2) A sentence  $S$  is true as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$  iff the proposition expressed by  $S$  in  $c_1$  (as assessed from  $c_2$ ) is true as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ .<sup>4</sup>

And, more generally:

- (3) A content  $k$  has extension  $x$  as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$  iff the extension of  $k$  is  $x$  at every circumstance of evaluation compatible with  $\langle c_1, c_2 \rangle$ .<sup>5</sup>
- (4) An expression  $E$  has extension  $x$  as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$  iff the content of  $E$  in  $c_1$  (as assessed from  $c_2$ ) has extension  $x$  as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$ .<sup>6</sup>

These definitions, by themselves, do not guarantee a commitment to assessment-sensitivity. Thus, to align with MacFarlane’s concept of relativism, we must also ensure that the contents in question are sensitive to contexts of assessment:

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<sup>1</sup> MacFarlane describes propositions as “abstract objects we use to characterize speech acts or mental states,” and they “are the contents of assertions and beliefs, and the things we call ‘true’ or ‘false’ in ordinary discourse.” (ibid., p. 71.) He tries to maintain neutrality on other aspects of the nature of propositions, unless forced to make a specific claim.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 47; p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

**Assessment-sensitive (contents).** *A content is assessment-sensitive if its extension as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$  depends on features of  $c_2$ .*

**F-assessment-sensitive (contents).** *A content is F-assessment-sensitive if its extension as used at  $c_1$  and assessed from  $c_2$  depends on the  $F$  of  $c_2$ .*<sup>1</sup>

The effect of their combination is that, on a relativist view, no truth-value is assigned absolutely. All propositions are true or false only relative to a specified assessor, and similarly, the correctness of one's utterance can only be judged relatively.

Now, MacFarlane has distinguished between contextualism and relativism, and has formulated the latter position clearly, but a problem remains: Even if the notion of assessment-relativity is conceptually permissible, what is its practical significance? As MacFarlane notes, “the *principal* challenge for truth relativism, and the one that the existing literature has made least progress in answering,”<sup>2</sup> is making sense of relative truth. Our previous discussion revealed that ordinary language does not necessarily support the use of the truth predicate in the way relativists propose. Indeed, MacFarlane explicitly states that a relativist truth predicate “is not the ordinary truth predicate used in everyday talk—a *monadic* predicate that applies to propositions.”<sup>3</sup> This predicate is governed by the widely accepted “**Equivalence Schema.** *The proposition that  $\phi$  is true iff  $\phi$ ,*”<sup>4</sup> which many philosophers find incompatible with truth relativism. Fortunately, this does not imply that we must abandon the monadic predicate to adopt a relativistic use of “true.” As MacFarlane observes:

The relativist (or nonindexical contextualist) can treat the monadic predicate “true” as just another predicate of the object language—the language for which she is giving a semantics. The natural semantics for it is this:

**Semantics for monadic “true.”** *“True” expresses the same property at every context of use—the property of being true. The extension of this property at a circumstance of evaluation  $e$  is the set of propositions that are true at  $e$ .*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 37; p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

Although this approach allows relativists to vindicate the Equivalence Schema, they still need to explain why their definition of “truth” aligns with our actual usage of the term. After all, as highlighted earlier, a semantic theory should closely relate to our pragmatic purposes — namely, conveying truth. However, MacFarlane recognizes that both non-relativists and relativists face challenges in elucidating truth itself. Therefore, he adopts a strategy that “look[s] at the best non-relativist explication of truth, and explicate[s] relative truth in a similar way, using similar materials.”<sup>1</sup> MacFarlane establishes the foundation for his assessment-sensitive semantics by illustrating its practical significance in explaining one’s retraction of an assertion.<sup>2</sup> To retract an assertion means that “one disavows the assertoric commitment undertaken in the original assertion.”<sup>3</sup> Since retraction occurs when a proposition asserted in its original context of use is deemed untrue in a given context of assessment, both contexts must be considered to determine the appropriateness of a retraction. This provides a normative reason to take assessment-sensitivity seriously.<sup>4</sup> This maneuver opens the door for assessment-relativity but does not conclusively “settle the question for whether there *is* any assessment sensitivity in language.” Nevertheless, it offers a neutral framework that does not discount relativism as a feasible semantic option. On this basis, MacFarlane applies his semantics to specific issues to garner linguistic data support. At this stage, we can reasonably expect MacFarlane’s conclusion to posit relativism as the most promising approach in each case he examines.

Without delving deeper into MacFarlane’s application of his theory to other domains, his approach can already be seen as a useful semantic interpretation of relativism aimed at resolving practical issues, a solution long sought after. MacFarlane’s project is fundamentally semantic, not just because he focuses on the conditions under which sentences express truths or falsehoods, but also because he does not prematurely commit to a specific metaphysical stance on non-relativism or relativism. His aim is to “put

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 42. Inspired by Jack Meiland, “Concepts of Relative Truth,” *The Monist* 60 (1977): p. 580.

<sup>2</sup> MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, ch. 5. This line of reasoning is based on the Truth Rule, which was mentioned earlier in footnote 2 on page 143. Due to space constraints, the details will not be elaborated upon here. For objections to this approach, see, for example, Wright, “New Age Relativism.”

<sup>3</sup> MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

relativist solutions to [the] problems on the table, so that they may be compared with non-relativist solutions and accepted or rejected on their merits.”<sup>1</sup> That is to say, he evaluates relativism against other approaches by weighing their theoretical strengths and weaknesses in addressing practical challenges. MacFarlane’s argumentative approach remains consistent across different discourse areas, and among the problems his semantics seeks to resolve, only one will be concentrated on, which is the most pertinent to this dissertation — knowledge attribution.<sup>2</sup>

### **Epistemic Relativism Rejected**

MacFarlane proposes that the commitment to the assessment sensitivity of certain sentences or propositions is what characterizes someone as a relativist about truth. As mentioned earlier, his objective is to evaluate various approaches to determine which offers the most effective resolution to challenging cases in our linguistic practices. In the context of knowledge attribution, he presents the following conundrum:

If you ask me whether I know that I have two dollars in my pocket, I will say that I do. I remember getting two dollar bills this morning as change for my breakfast; I would have stuffed them into my pocket, and I haven’t bought anything else since. On the other hand, if you ask me whether I know that my pockets have not been picked in the last few hours, I will say that I do not. Pickpockets are stealthy; one doesn’t always notice them. But how *can* I know that I have two dollars in my pocket if I don’t know that my pockets haven’t been picked? After all, if my pockets were picked, then I *don’t* have two dollars in my pocket.

It is tempting to concede that I don’t know that I have two dollars in my pocket. And this capitulation seems harmless enough. All I have to do to gain the knowledge I thought I had is check my pockets. But we can play the same game again. I see the bills I received this morning. They are right there in my pocket. But can I rule out the possibility that they are counterfeits? Surely not. I don’t have the special skills that are needed to tell counterfeit from genuine bills. How, then, can I know that I have two dollars in my pocket? After all, if the bills are counterfeit, then I don’t have two dollars in my pocket.<sup>3</sup>

The crux of this dilemma lies in the unexpected shifts in our willingness to ascribe knowledge. Dismissing our standard linguistic practices of knowledge attribution and

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. v.

<sup>2</sup> That said, some of these concerns have already been mentioned in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, p. 176.

evaluation might seem like a viable option, such as aligning with skeptics to contend that we possess far less knowledge than we typically claim. However, if we regard ordinary language with higher esteem, then failing to account for the conflicting intuitions about our varying willingness, which stem from the violation of a widely accepted epistemic principle:

**Closure.** *If  $\alpha$  knows that  $p$ , and  $p$  obviously entails  $q$ , then  $\alpha$  could come to know  $q$  without further empirical investigation.*<sup>1</sup>

*Closure* is costly to reject, for “abandoning *Closure* seems to deprive deductive inference of its ability to extend knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, it is this very rejection that enables the argument in the conundrum to function:

1.  $p$  obviously entails  $q$ . [premise]
2. If  $\alpha$  knows that  $p$ , then  $\alpha$  could come to know that  $q$  without further empirical investigation. [1, *Closure*]
3.  $\alpha$  does not know that  $q$  and could not come to know that  $q$  without further empirical investigation. [premise]
4. Hence  $\alpha$  does not know that  $p$ . [2, 3, modus tollens]<sup>3</sup>

To reconcile ordinary judgments and the principle of *Closure*, a form of relativization is necessary to explain the variability in our willingness to use the same predicate. One approach is to adopt contextualism, which posits that the meaning of “know” shifts depending on the context in which it is used. “On the most natural form of this view, ‘knowing’ that  $p$  requires being able to rule out contextually relevant alternatives to  $p$ .”<sup>4</sup> Since the context of use determines which alternatives are relevant, not ruling out every conceivable alternative is permissible in most cases, thus justifying the use of “know” in a limited sense within those contexts. In the conundrum presented, the context excluding the consideration of pickpockets differs from the one where the possibility of pickpocketing is acknowledged. Therefore, we can justifiably claim to know we have two dollars in our

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

pockets in the former context, even though such a claim becomes implausible in the latter context.

Contextualism offers an explanation for our varying willingness to ascribe knowledge in different contexts. However, the issue is that we do not typically use “know” as a context-sensitive term, for that would require us to be aware of its relativity when we use it, or when we are reminded of its dependence on contextual features. Furthermore, when we recognize conflicting intuitions — between everyday knowledge attribution and our tacit commitment to *Closure* — in the conundrum, we find this troubling because we expect them not to coexist. If I assert knowledge of having two dollars in my pocket and you challenge me with an unforeseen possibility, I perceive your response as a disagreement with my epistemic judgment. According to contextualists, however, there is no actual confrontation — we are either making knowledge claims as usual or following *Closure*, hence no possibility for disagreement. The same reasoning applies to retracting assertions. This familiar issue of losing disagreements does not necessarily mean contextualists cannot explain things in this manner, but it does make contextualism less convincing as a comprehensive account of all relevant intuitions.

The shortcoming of contextualism appears to be our discomfort with the notion that the meaning of “know” fluctuates from context to context. Once the relevant alternatives are established in a given context, they remain fixed. However, to account for the variability in our willingness to make positive epistemic judgments, we need some element of variability. A potential solution is to maintain epistemic standards as context-insensitive and identify a perspective that affects the truth-evaluation of epistemic claims. A theory that adopts this approach is subject-sensitive invariantism (SSI) which “holds that ‘knows’ invariantly expresses a property whose extension at a circumstance of evaluation depends on features of the subject’s practical situation.”<sup>1</sup> This view is connected to pragmatic encroachment introduced earlier, and SSI advocates argue that it is not the context, but rather traditionally overlooked practical features, particularly the subject’s interests, that play a significant role in determining which alternatives are relevant. However, considering

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 182.



typical circumstances of evaluation like times and possible worlds, the following sentences might sound peculiar:

- (i) I know that I had two dollars in my pocket after breakfast, but I didn't know it this morning, when the possibility of counterfeits was relevant to my practical deliberations—even though I believed it then on the same grounds that I do now.
- (ii) I know that I have two dollars in my pocket, but if the possibility of counterfeiting were relevant to my practical situation, I would not know this—even if I believed it on the same grounds as now.<sup>1</sup>

What this oddity reveals is that SSI's core thesis conflicts with another of our intuitions: that the evidential standards for “knowing” are fixed “rigidly across times and counterfactual situations.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, SSI, like contextualism, is not a flawless solution.

Instead of focusing on the practical situation of the subject to whom knowledge is attributed, nonindexical contextualism posits that truth value is determined, broadly, by a specified assessor. This approach avoids the temporal and modal embedding problem of SSI, as it does not necessitate shifting relevant alternatives with the world and time of evaluation. Moreover, since it “takes the accuracy of assertions and beliefs to depend on the alternatives that are relevant at the context of *use*,”<sup>3</sup> it more effectively accounts for contradictory truth ascriptions. This means that when an assessor challenges an original epistemic claim or when the agent herself wants to retract her previous claim, there is a genuine reason to do so — specifically, to highlight the incorrectness of the old judgment in light of a new epistemic standard. However, nonindexical contextualism is not entirely satisfactory. While it explains conflicts in evaluation of the same claim, it only does so partially. The key issue is that in disagreements or retractions, we feel a normative pressure to correct the original claim, not just acknowledge a change in its truth-value. If we focus solely on the context of use without considering contexts of assessment, it may seem appropriate to maintain that the original claim remains true in its original context, even if we concur with the assessor that it is false in the current context. From MacFarlane's point

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-85. Cited numbering has been slightly adjusted for consistency in this work.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 190-91.

of view, this is counterintuitive and needs an additional commitment to assessment sensitivity.

Traditional semantic frameworks only consider the context of use and circumstances of evaluation for variation. Therefore, to fully account for truth that is sensitive to contexts of assessment, it is beneficial to adopt MacFarlane's relativist semantics:

**Relativist postsemantics.**<sup>1</sup> *A sentence  $S$  is true as used at context  $c_1$  and assessed from a context  $c_2$  iff for all assignments  $a$ ,*

$$\llbracket S \rrbracket_{\langle w_{c_1}, t_{c_1}, s_{c_2}, a \rangle}^{c_1} = True$$

where  $w_{c_1}$  is the world of  $c_1$ ,  $t_{c_1}$  is the time of  $c_1$ , and  $s_{c_2}$  is the set of possibilities relevant at  $c_2$ .<sup>2</sup>

To summarize, MacFarlane has examined several candidate theories,<sup>3</sup> each presenting its own strengths and weaknesses. In contrast, relativism appears to combine all the advantages while avoiding the drawbacks of its competitors. Thus, according to MacFarlane:

From the relativist's point of view, invariantism and contextualism each capture part of the truth about knowledge attributions. Invariantism is right that there is a single knowledge relation, but contextualism is right that our willingness to ascribe knowledge depends on a contextually variable set of relevant alternatives, rather than a fixed set of alternatives or one determined by the subject's practical situation. Relativism synthesizes these insights, while avoiding the weakness of the two one-sided views. There is a single knowledge relation, but its extension (as assessed from a particular context) depends on which possibilities are relevant at the context of assessment.<sup>4</sup>

However, MacFarlane's strategy would only work if relativism itself does not possess a significant flaw like its competing theories. Yet, it has already been mentioned that there exist potential issues with following the path of New Age Relativists, which will

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<sup>1</sup> MacFarlane calls "the definition of truth at a context and index the *semantics proper* and the definition of truth at a context in terms of this the *postsemantics*." (ibid., p. 58.)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> Dogmatism and expressivism will be discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, pp. 189-90.

become more evident in Carter's subsequent objection. Let us begin with some preliminary scenarios. Assume Alan can distinguish a chaffinch from a goldfinch just by sight, but cannot differentiate a chaffinch from a hologram chaffinch in the same way. Consider the following cases:

*Case 1:* Alan is in a friendly environment (no holograms around) and sees a chaffinch and forms the belief 'There is a chaffinch'.

*Case 2:* Alan is in a friendly environment (no holograms around) and forms the belief 'There is a chaffinch'. Subsequently, Adrian tells Alan a lie: that there are hologram chaffinches mixed with the real chaffinches.<sup>1</sup>

Case 1 is a typical scenario, where Alan might encounter usual entities, including chaffinches, goldfinches, and others, but not hologram chaffinches. For Alan's proposition to be true, he needs to rule out relevant possibilities like goldfinches (among others), but not hologram chaffinches. Alan has the ability to tell a chaffinch from a goldfinch, which we can term *discriminatory epistemic support*.

Case 2 involves a deceptive figure, Adrian, necessitating Alan to consider hologram chaffinches as relevant alternatives to maintain his knowledge claim. Although Alan lacks the specific discriminatory epistemic support required in this scenario, he can still rationally exclude them based on background evidence, such as the absence of hologram machines in the area. This type of epistemic support can be referred to as *favoring epistemic support*.

These two types of epistemic support delineate distinct methods for an alternative to be deemed epistemically relevant. Thus, to know a target proposition, one must have the ability to rationally exclude relevant alternatives, whether through discriminatory or favoring epistemic support.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, there is a differentiation in the nature of alternatives in these scenarios: "Call an alternative *primary relevant* if it is the kind of alternative that might plausibly occur in one's environment, and call an alternative *secondary relevant* if it is made relevant in some other way such as by one's becoming

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, pp. 175-76.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 177. The terminology is introduced and developed in Duncan Pritchard, "Relevant Alternatives, Perceptual Knowledge and Discrimination," *Noûs* 44, no. 2 (2010); J. Adam Carter and Duncan Pritchard, "Perceptual Knowledge and Relevant Alternatives," *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 4 (2016/04/01 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0533-y>, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0533-y>.

aware of the alternative.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, in Case 1, Alan needs to dismiss goldfinches as they are primarily relevant alternatives, but in Case 2, he should consider hologram chaffinches as secondarily relevant alternatives. Keeping these distinctions in mind, let us examine a situation that Carter identifies as problematic for relativists:

*Case 3:* Alan is in an environment where there are hologram chaffinches mixed with the real chaffinches, but he thinks he is in a friendly environment. He sees what looks like a chaffinch and forms the belief ‘There is a chaffinch’. Charles and Liz are in a friendly environment (no holograms around). Liz says ‘Alan knows that what he is looking at is a chaffinch’ and Charles evaluates this claim.<sup>2</sup>

Some readers may have already recognized the potential alteration in our intuition due to the inclusion of hologram chaffinches as relevant alternatives. This variation in our willingness to attribute knowledge stems from the distinction between an epistemically friendly environment and an epistemically inhospitable environment. An epistemically friendly environment makes it easier for Alan to count as a knower. For instance, in a typical scenario like Case 1, there is little dispute about Alan’s ability to competently know that he is observing a chaffinch simply by distinguishing it from goldfinches. However, if hologram chaffinches are present in Alan’s environment, it becomes inhospitable for epistemic claims, as Alan cannot independently rule out hologram alternatives. Therefore, when Alan asserts that “there is a chaffinch” in such an environment, our inclination to attribute knowledge to him diminishes. Even if he is indeed observing a real chaffinch, his inability to distinguish it from a hologram implies a high likelihood of error. Thus, Alan’s belief is true, albeit due to a form of environmental epistemic luck, which mainstream epistemologists generally consider incompatible with knowledge, as it is believed that knowledge should not be gained from a risky source. Consequently, Alan would not be regarded as “knowing” that there is a chaffinch if environmental epistemic luck significantly influences his belief formation.

In Case 2, the hologram chaffinches introduced by Adrian are merely secondarily relevant to Alan, but in Case 3, they become primarily relevant, as the existence of hologram chaffinch alternatives becomes an actual consideration, irrespective of Alan’s

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178. Note that the order number has been changed.

perception of the situation. However, the scenario appears significantly different from the perspectives of Charles and Liz, leading to what Carter finds implausible in MacFarlane's relativism:

According to MacFarlane's proposal, Liz's claim that 'Alan knows that what he's looking at is a chaffinch' is true only relative to a context of use (which fixes the world/time) and context of assessment, which fixes what counts as the relevant alternatives. As evaluated by Charles, the context of assessment fixing the relevant alternatives will be a *friendly environment*, one where hologram chaffinch alternatives needn't be ruled out — there are neither any hologram chaffinches present in Charles' environment nor has this possibility been raised, and so hologram chaffinches are not secondary relevant for Charles either. In Charles' friendly, normal environment, one can attain knowledge that one is looking at a chaffinch provided one can distinguish *chaffinches from goldfinches*. And because Alan *can* distinguish chaffinches from goldfinches, MacFarlane's view rules that Liz's claim that 'Alan knows that what he's looking at is a chaffinch' comes out true as evaluated by Charles. *But it's not true!* After all, Alan is in an environment with hologram, chaffinches mixed in with the genuine ones, and could very easily have pointed to a hologram rather than a genuine chaffinch and would have believed incorrectly. Moreover, Alan's belief is subject to environmental luck; he could easily have been incorrect, given the conditions of the formation of his belief, and this due to features of Alan's modal environment: in the epistemically inhospitable area where Alan is forming beliefs about chaffinches, there are very close near-by worlds in which Alan looks at a hologram chaffinch while believing he is looking at a chaffinch.<sup>1</sup>

The crux of this objection is clear: when there is a primarily relevant alternative in Alan's immediate environment that he needs to dismiss to truly know the targeted proposition, it creates a forceful pressure in all contexts of assessment for related knowledge claims, compelling the judges to consider it. In this light, the relevant alternatives cannot be solely determined by a given context of assessment. Specifically:

[W]hat makes the hologram chaffinch alternatives relevant for Alan in Case 3 [...] is that his local environment is such that there *are in fact very close near-by possible worlds in which what he is looking at just now (and believing to be a chaffinch) is not a chaffinch but a hologram chaffinch*. Put another way: what makes the hologram chaffinch alternative relevant for Alan in Case 3 [...] is Alan's *modal environment, as determined by Alan's local environment*. And Alan's *modal environment* remains the same across all possible contexts of assessment.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 178-79.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

Carter emphasizes the need to reject environmental epistemic luck. More broadly, Carter argues that if a set of alternatives is established as primarily relevant in a specific case, then its legitimacy as primarily relevant transcends any single context. Carter uses a familiar scenario to illustrate this point:

[T]ake a case,  $C_1$ , where a set of alternatives  $A$  are primary relevant and another case  $C_2$  where another *distinct* set,  $A^*$ , are primary relevant. Our view of knowledge should say that whether there's knowledge in  $C_1$  depends on whether the subject  $n$  in  $C_1$  can rule out  $A$  and whether there's knowledge in  $C_2$  depends on whether the subject in  $C_2$  can rule out  $A^*$ . Now imagine a context of assessment where, by whatever mechanisms MacFarlane posits, a set  $A^{**}$  — distinct from  $A$  and from  $A^*$  — are relevant. MacFarlane posits, a set  $A^{**}$  — distinct from  $A$  and from  $A^*$  — are relevant. Because MacFarlane claims that the truth of the assessment (*vis-à-vis*  $C_1$  and  $C_2$ ) depends on whether the subjects can rule out  $A^{**}$ , it follows that there's knowledge in  $C_1$  if, and only if, there's knowledge in  $C_2$ . But any good theory of knowledge tells us this biconditional is false.<sup>1</sup>

Here, however, a natural question arises if we follow this dissertation's line of thought: How is  $A$  determined? A set of epistemic relevant alternatives to rule out is essentially an epistemic standard.<sup>2</sup> In the face of epistemic circularity, since Carter's counterarguments do not conclusively negate non-absolutism, there is no clear method yet for confirming a single epistemic standard. Therefore, Carter is implicitly adopting a definitive metaphysical stance on epistemic standards that requires further justification, regardless of whether his argument holds or not. This stance will be explored in detail soon, but for now, let us focus on Carter's observations. Unsurprisingly, Carter's next step directly relates to his epistemological metaphysical position. As he continues, Carter notes that while the problem of modal environment primarily concerns relevant alternatives, MacFarlane's view is not free from issues concerning secondarily relevant alternatives. Consider this scenario:

**Case 4:** The zoo that Zula is visiting has a number of signs posted near the zebra enclosure which state (falsely) that the creatures therein are not zebras but cleverly disguised mules. Suppose further that Zula *should* have spotted these signs, but fails

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> In the early development of his theory, MacFarlane was more inclined to use "epistemic standard" due to its broader sense. See John MacFarlane, "The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions," *Oxford studies in epistemology* 1 (2005); "Relativism and Disagreement," *Philosophical studies* 132, no. 1 (2007).

to simply because she is a very inattentive person. Zula\*, let's suppose, is like Zula in all respects (e.g. she has the same discriminatory abilities — she can tell zebras from things that might plausibly be found in a zoo, e.g. horses, moose, but not from cleverly disguised mules) except that she's in an environment where there is no misleading sign, but rather (to make things simple) an accurate sign which states that there are 'zebras and only zebras' in the zebra enclosure. Suppose further that Zula\* is attentive and does see this sign. Now suppose that Zula and Zula\* both look at a (genuine) zebra in their respective environments and form the belief 'There is a zebra'. Charles and Liz are, like Zula\*, in a friendly environment (no misleading signs around). Liz says 'Zula and Zula\* know that what they are looking at is a zebra' and Charles evaluates this claim.<sup>1</sup>

In Case 4, although a cleverly disguised mule wouldn't be considered a plausible primarily relevant alternative, it should be recognized as a secondarily relevant alternative due to the signs. Unlike Alan in Case 2, Zula is unaware of this relevant alternative indicated by the sign. This leads to a distinction between two ways an epistemic alternative can become secondarily relevant: either the subject is personally aware of the alternative, or the subject epistemically ought to be aware of it. This might remind us of the previously introduced concept of normative defeaters, along with the distinction between psychological and normative defeaters. They are helpful for understanding Carter's point here. As Jennifer Lackey concludes:

A psychological defeater is a doubt or belief that is had by S, which indicates that S's belief that p is either false or unreliably formed or sustained. Defeaters in this sense function by virtue of being *had* by S, regardless of their truth-value or epistemic status. [...] A normative defeater is a doubt or belief that S ought to have, which indicates that S's belief that p is either false or unreliably formed or sustained. Defeaters in this sense function by virtue of being doubts or beliefs that S *should have* (whether or not S does have them) given the presence of certain available evidence.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on this, Carter's core argument is that a normatively secondary relevant alternative is pivotal, irrespective of the subject's awareness. In other words, Zula cannot ignore the normative implication posed by the sign. Regardless of the context in which a knowledge claim about her epistemic status is evaluated, the cleverly disguised mule alternative remains constantly secondary relevant to be taken into account. Since Zula is

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 186. Note that the order number has been changed.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Lackey, "Testimonial Knowledge," in *Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Sven Berneker and Duncan Pritchard (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 317.

inattentive and does not consider the possibility of a disguised mule, she should not be recognized as having genuine knowledge of seeing a zebra. However, MacFarlane's relativism would not anticipate that Charles's evaluation of Liz's epistemic judgment would be negative, as there is no sign in Charles's context of assessment to make cleverly disguised mules a relevant alternative. Given that the normative pressure in Zula's inhospitable epistemic environment extends beyond her specific situation, rendering her unqualified as a knower in any context, MacFarlane's model incorrectly implies that Charles may not consider Zula's knowledge claim negatively, as assessment-sensitive relativism suggests that relevant alternatives are determined within the confines of the current context of assessment. Consequently, Carter argues that MacFarlane's relativism also encounters significant issues, particularly with respect to normatively secondary relevant alternatives.

The essence of Carter's two objections to MacFarlane's stance seems to converge on one point. While Carter believes that in cases like Case 3, involving primary relevant alternatives, the deeper issue "is that the view fails to make sense of the epistemic significance of primary relevant alternatives," and in cases like Case 4, involving normatively secondary relevant alternatives, the problem is that it "stands in tension with ordinary thinking about normative defeat,"<sup>1</sup> he also illustrates a more overarching concern — that is:

[B]y making the *context of assessment* the relevant context, one abstracts away from the environment of the subject of the knowledge attribution in a way that rules out epistemic anti-individualism in any case where the environment of the subject of the knowledge attribution and the context in which the knowledge attribution is assessed for truth/falsity *must* be kept apart.<sup>2</sup>

Epistemic anti-individualism posits that "what converts true belief to knowledge can supervene at least partly on elements of one's local and/or modal environment."<sup>3</sup> This is quite understandable, though it does not fully refute relativism without demonstrating its own justifiability and its source of normative force. Nonetheless, Carter is not aiming for

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



an outright rejection of relativism. Remember, MacFarlane's argumentative strategy for his position involves highlighting the major flaws in competing theories and showing that relativism does not suffer from similar critical issues. However, confronted with epistemic anti-individualism, MacFarlane's argument appears less tenable, as skepticism about the legitimacy of this norm could undermine part of the epistemic principle we implicitly embrace, which is intuitively problematic. As a result, relativism does not seem to hold a unique advantage in explaining our use of epistemic language, as it faces the same challenge as its principal rivals.

Ongoing debates are likely to persist regarding which stance more accurately reflects our everyday use of "knowledge." Nevertheless, what is crucial to note here is that the semantic interpretation of relativism also fails to provide a compelling reason to favor epistemic relativism over other theories. This inability to decisively differentiate relativism from its alternatives undermines its appeal as a more suitable theory explaining our epistemic practice.

### 3.2.2 Disputes about Tastes and the Ordinary View

MacFarlane's assessment relativism is designed to address practical issues, but unfortunately, at least in the realm of epistemic discourse, it falls short of an ideal solution. This, however, does not entirely undermine the plausibility of relativism. A potential approach, as hinted previously, is to scrutinize the actuality of the normative pressure exerted by epistemic anti-individualism. Nevertheless, the next chapter will reveal that this could be a precarious path. But before we explore the reason behind this, it is worthwhile to consider another intriguing phenomenon related to both the debates over relativism and the debates over conflicting views of wisdom.

#### **Faultless Disagreements and the Ordinary View**

As mentioned earlier, there are certain standards we do not judge by, as these standards do not serve as normative constraints to which we should adhere. If such standards exist, they are more accurately seen as "a codification of regularities" in "our actual patterns of appraisal." A notable example is the concept of faultless disagreements

in some areas of discourse. Wright's relativism about taste provides a typical instance of this phenomenon:

Imagine that Tim Williamson thinks that stewed rhubarb is delicious and that I beg to differ, finding its dry acidity highly disagreeable. There is, on the face of it, no reason to deny that this is a genuine disagreement—each holding to a view that the other rejects. But it is a disagreement about which, at least at first pass, the Latin proverb—*de gustibus non est disputandum*—seems apt. It is, we feel—or is likely to be—a disagreement which there is no point in trying to settle, because it concerns no real matter of fact but is merely an expression of different, permissibly idiosyncratic tastes. Nobody's wrong. Tim and I should just agree to disagree.<sup>1</sup>

Wright labels what is illustrated in this dispute as *the Ordinary View*. He characterizes it by three key features:

- (1) that they involve genuinely incompatible attitudes (*Contradiction*);
- (2) that nobody need be mistaken or otherwise at fault (*Faultlessness*), and
- (3) that the antagonists may, perfectly rationally, stick to their respective views even after the disagreement come to light and impresses as intractable (*Sustainability*).<sup>2</sup>

The essence of the Ordinary View is to recognize the justifiable existence of ongoing disagreements on certain topics. Putting aside the question about which issues are indeed encompassed in this category, for current purposes, it is more beneficial to consider how these three features should be cohesively integrated if such disagreements do exist. Wright outlines four proposals:

- (i) *Rampant Realist Account*: This account suggests that there is no truly faultless disagreement. A disagreement cannot legitimately continue indefinitely because there is always a fact that determines the truth, and this fact would resolve the conflict. It is our lack of information about such a fact that leads to the Ordinary View. The central problem with this view is that it does not seem plausible to assume that there are objective facts about subjective experiences, such as deliciousness. Furthermore, if such facts exist, arguing with others

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<sup>1</sup> Crispin Wright, "Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism and Rhubarb," in *Truth and Realism*, ed. Patrick Greenough and P. Michael Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

becomes unreasonable since nobody knows these facts, thus precluding Sustainability.

- (ii) *Moderate Realist Account*: This view posits that even though there is no fact in the strict sense to decide which opinion is right, the consensus of the majority of well-qualified judges should be the correct answer to end the dispute. Like its rampant counterpart, this view is problematic as the existence of well-qualified judges of taste is also speculative. Additionally, accepting this presupposition leads, once again, to the preclusion of Sustainability.
- (iii) *Expressivist Account*: According to this approach, there is no genuine disagreement, as neither Williamson's nor Wright's statements have content that can be negated. The Ordinary View results from being misled by the indicative surface of their statements, while their claims are merely expressions of attitudinal differences. Expressivist proposals are challenged by various difficulties in the philosophy of language, such as making sense of conditional, disjunctive, and tensed constructions, and many philosophers believe that expressivists have not provided satisfactory responses to these challenges.
- (iv) *Ellipsis-Relativist Account*: This proposal suggests that while there is faultless disagreement, the disputants do not materially conflict. The dispute's indicative appearances could be interpreted as being elliptical and considered in a relativistic manner, such as "Rhubarb is delicious by Williamson's standards." This approach risks distorting what Williamson and Wright actually mean.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, *Contextualist Account* might explain the Ordinary View, but it does so at the expense of diminishing the difference between a normal context, where we genuinely disagree with opposing opinions, and a relativistic context, where we understand from the outset that people have divergent thoughts that can be justified relative to their standards, thus making the feature of Contradiction illusory.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A similar problem was previously mentioned in our response to Harman's relativism.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, "Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism," pp. 38-40. My dubbings.

Wright argues that these four proposals fail to satisfactorily maintain the Ordinary View because they compromise one or more of its three components. However, advocating for “relativism” is not entirely misguided. Through careful analysis, Wright highlights that the distinctive intuition underpinning the Ordinary View, as opposed to conventional views on disagreements, is its implicit and unusual emphasis on Sustainability. Recall that in our earlier discussion on epistemic practicality, it was framed as a demand for concluding an epistemic activity, as if it were all about finding a solution to a problematic scenario or selecting a particular way to answer a question. This is typically expected to be the case, especially in scientific inquiry. To quote Wright:

In the scientific example, there is reason to accept (at least if one is scientific realist) the disjunctive claim: one theory or the other—and perhaps both—will be false to the facts. One in particular—perhaps both—of the rival theorists will be proposing a misrepresentation of Nature. And the point is then that, notwithstanding that consideration, there are nevertheless overriding *pragmatic* reasons, grounded in the desirability of having a theory in the first place, for each to persist in their respective views—so that we have Sustainability anyway.<sup>1</sup>

In similar scenarios, disputants genuinely disagree with each other, and observers like us naturally expect their debate to continue. However, it is understood that the disagreement persists with the ultimate goal of resolving the issue. In other words, the disagreement’s continuation is justified by the epistemically practical aim of arriving at a final revelation that everyone expects to happen. It is this expectation that supports Sustainability in typical cases. Yet, in the context that Wright discusses, such a revelation of truth is not anticipated. While the Ordinary View also expects disputes over tastes like rhubarb to go on forever, it is unclear why we should hope for the discovery of the truth of deliciousness.

At this juncture, it is important to note that my previous discussion about genuine disagreements did not rule out potential agnostic interpretations of their metaphysical presumptions. I was only assuming the absence, not the non-existence, of a definitive metaphysical fact to resolve such disagreements. By contrast, Wright argues that in faultless disagreements over subjects like taste, there evidently is no determinate fact of the matter (e.g., the deliciousness of rhubarb). Recognizing this distinction is crucial, as

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

failing to follow Wright on this point makes it hard to entirely dismiss the Rampant Realist Account. Considering this, Wright's proposal is beneficial. This suggests a similar understanding in other similar cases, including what is crucial for this dissertation — wisdom.

A rational conclusion from this is that all disputants in such debates are perfectly understandable, regardless of their idiosyncratic tastes and vehement oppositions — Sustainability is thus founded on Faultlessness. This, at first glance, may not seem surprising, but it deeply challenges our intuitions, as the semantic principle of bivalence typically dictates that of a proposition and its negation, one is true and the other false. Conversely, the Ordinary View suggests that both Williamson and Wright could be correct. How, then, could relativism uphold the Ordinary View? Traditional relativism might argue that in a fault-free disagreement, each disputant is correct relative to their frame of reference, despite apparent conflicts in their statements. But this does not adequately address what the disputants truly mean. Moreover, the relevant form of relativism here needs to serve not just as a method to resolve disagreements, but also as a means to explain the plausible existence of the Ordinary View, supporting two seemingly conflicting intuitions: the expectation that people will persistently argue about certain matters and the understanding that such quarrels are not for the epistemically practical purpose of bringing us closer to a truth capable of resolving the disagreement, but represent an enduring conflict where objectively no one loses. Wright's point, then, is that the suitable form of relativism should be characterized as follows:

Relativism, I want to suggest, is best viewed as a *theoretical attempt* to underwrite and reconcile the elements in the Ordinary View. It is a response to the problem, rather than merely a label for the amalgam of ideas which gives rise to it.<sup>1</sup>

### **Relativism, Contextualism, and Objectivism**

The significance of recognizing the viewpoint of onlookers is emphasizing an often-overlooked aspect of the debate over the taste of rhubarb — that is, that Williamson and Wright do disagree; it is the onlookers who suggest that Williamson and Wright should “agree to disagree.” This observation is crucial because attributing the idea of relativization

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

directly to Williamson and Wright is inappropriate, as they would unlikely accept such a stance. If they did, it would negate the basis for a sustained debate, as rational debaters would not challenge a relative truth. However, the scenario also introduces the possibility that someone outside of Williamson and Wright acknowledges the endless nature of the debate, which leads to the identification of three distinct parties in the disagreement: (i) Williamson, who believes rhubarb is delicious and Wright is wrong; (ii) Wright, who believes rhubarb is not delicious and Williamson is wrong; and (iii) onlookers, who think Williamson and Wright should agree their opinions are not in conflict, a view both Williamson and Wright would likely reject.

The common relativist proposal, such as the *Ellipsis-Relativist Account*, as outlined earlier both in the discussion of MacFarlane's relativism and Wright's elaboration, contributes to making sentences true by assigning a specific context, framework, or something similar. This might suggest that, in some sense, the difference between contextualism and relativism is not that significant.<sup>1</sup> Be that as it may, the functionality of the *Ellipsis-Relativist Account* or the *Contextualist Account* does not seem to aid much in faultless disagreements, as neither party in the dispute is content with their sentences being true only in a relative sense. As Wright notes:

A philosopher seeking to stabilize the Ordinary View should not be interested in relativity—as a function of context of utterance, or whatever else—in the truth-conditions, and hence the truth-values, of *sentences*. The relativity that needs to be made out is relativity in the truth of *thoughts*, or *propositions*.<sup>2</sup>

The critical point is that what needs to be relativized are not the sentences themselves, but the entire speech acts in which Williamson disagrees with Wright and *vice versa*. To clarify this distinction, consider the following example:

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<sup>1</sup> For similar illustration of the attributor-contextualist accounts of knowledge that Wright has in mind, see, e.g., Keith DeRose, "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 4 (1992), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2107917>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2107917>; "Assertion, Knowledge, and Context," *The Philosophical Review* 111, no. 2 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3182618>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3182618>; Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2676096>. Cited in Wright, "Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism," p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> "Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism," p. 53.

Suppose that in the course of a medical procedure, a surgeon says of a scalpel that's been poorly prepared: 'This instrument is dangerously blunt.' Later, when the instrument is about to be re-sharpened and sterilized, his assistant may warn an inexperienced orderly: 'Watch out when you handle that—it's dangerously sharp.'<sup>1</sup>

In this case, both the surgeon and the assistant are right within their respective contexts, and a contextualist interpretation can provide a reasonable explanation for how both can be considered competent knowers in such scenarios. However, a key aspect of these cases is that the surgeon's statement is not supported by the assistant's context, and similarly, the assistant's statement is not supported by the surgeon's context. Essentially, while they are referring to the same object, they are not discussing the same aspect of it. Therefore, they are not contradicting each other — there is no Contradiction. This becomes particularly evident when considering the practical consequences:

each can quite coherently accept and, in various ways, appropriately *act on* the other's claim while still maintaining his own—surely a conclusive consideration in favour of the point that different, and compatible, contents are involved.<sup>2</sup>

This recognition of the interlocutors' background contexts and the necessity for contextualization to accurately understand those with opposing opinions is not just a strategy employed by the main participants in the discussion. "A third party can accept not merely that the surgeon's and the orderly's claims are both correct in their respective contexts: she can, as it were, take both claims on board—indeed the orderly does so, in effect, by replacing the knife with a better prepared one for the purpose of the surgery and then taking appropriate personal care while he sharpens and sterilizes the rejected knife."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in faultless disagreements, it is inconceivable that all parties involved could simultaneously adopt both conflicting viewpoints as practical guidance. If Williamson is correct, then we should purchase and consume rhubarb; conversely, if Wright is correct, we should avoid rhubarb products.

The introduction of the Ordinary View serves to highlight a similar phenomenon encountered in everyday discussions of wisdom. Recall the scenario from Chapter 1, where

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> According to attributor contextualism. Ibid., p. 59, n. 15.

two individuals with contradictory worldviews are both recognized as wise individuals. Even when they directly oppose each other's core beliefs about life, we, as external observers, see no reason to deny either's wisdom. Therefore, while epistemic relativism may not be flawless, it emerges as a compelling and potent approach for explaining our linguistic practice of attributing wisdom, especially when considering wisdom from an epistemological perspective. The remaining issue, as identified in the critiques by Wright and Carter, is relativism's struggle to account for some non-reflexive epistemic norms. The implications of this challenge will be addressed in the next chapter, but it is clear that this constitutes a significant problem.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have explored various forms of relativism, particularly epistemic relativism, as potential solutions to the seemingly intractable disagreements about wisdom encountered in Chapter 1. However, prevalent relativist theories do not provide a conclusive reason to prefer relativism over absolutism or other conventional views on epistemic facts. Traditional epistemic relativists base their arguments on the absence of a meta-standard to determine the appropriate epistemic standard in genuine epistemic disagreements. While this allows them to challenge the epistemic absolutists' assumption of a singular, universal epistemic standard, their own assertion of multiple relative epistemic standards is at least equally unsubstantiated. New epistemic relativism, in contrast, posits that a relativist semantics more effectively explains certain aspects of epistemic discourse that are otherwise difficult to interpret. This approach does not presuppose the acceptance of a relativist metaphysical fact. However, although relativism has advantages in explaining some uses of epistemic language, it struggles, particularly in contexts with normative pressure that transcends specific situations, to justify seemingly universal normative requirements for correct epistemic judgment. That said, relativism turns out to be surprisingly apt in explaining three-party disagreements, which concerns the debates over wisdom. In summary, while epistemic relativism may offer a viable approach to the difficulties in wisdom literature, its theoretical strengths are accompanied by weaknesses.



At first glance, the inquiry in this chapter might seem unsatisfactory, as we have not reached a definitive stance on whether to adopt or reject epistemic relativism. Yet, considering epistemic relativism as a potentially viable theory already represents significant progress. Epistemic relativism occupies a unique position in epistemology: it provides an alternative to skepticism and a method for resolving insoluble epistemic disagreements, yet it remains somewhat peripheral, attracting only limited attention from proponents of either the pro-knowledge or anti-knowledge camps. In this light, acknowledging and examining the justifiability of epistemic relativism as an epistemological position based on epistemic practicality is a noteworthy advancement. However, there is a perception that epistemic relativism might not align with traditional epistemological positions. Sankey, for instance, views epistemic relativists as skeptics in disguise:

On the face of it, the two doctrines tend in opposite directions. Scepticism refrains from positive attribution of knowledge or justified belief, whereas the relativist asserts that knowledge and justified belief exist but depend upon operative norms. But, while the two doctrines differ at one level, they converge at a deeper level. For, if the fundamental argument for relativism is a sceptical one, this suggests that relativism is ultimately a sceptical doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

Although Sankey's argument against epistemic relativism as a form of skepticism is not entirely convincing, his concern does raise an intriguing question about the nature of epistemic relativism. It seems unusual for an epistemic stance to potentially side with skepticism, which is often considered an adversary by many epistemologists. This prompts us to question whether epistemic relativism fundamentally diverges from most established epistemological positions. Carter's observations hint at this possibility, and Wright's discussions provide some insight into how this might be the case. In the next chapter, we will delve deeper into this topic, seeking to discern the deeper distinction between epistemic relativism and more conventional theories that are prevalent in current epistemological literature. This exploration will also lead us to a more profound level of investigation into normativity, specifically the epistemic normativity of wisdom in epistemology.

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<sup>1</sup> Sankey, "Scepticism, Relativism," p. 190.

### Chapter 3: A Process Understanding of Epistemic Discourse

**Chapter Abstract:** This chapter delves deeper into whether epistemic relativism is a suitable approach for theorizing about wisdom. It argues that the second-order commitment of our epistemic discourse offers both explanatory and justifying reasons for rejecting relativism in epistemology. However, instead of adopting the standard realist interpretation, this dissertation advocates for an epistemic expressivist account of this commitment, which views epistemic discourse as a process driven by epistemic desires. Compared to the standard understanding, epistemic expressivism can account for our epistemic linguistic practices without the controversial assumption of accessible epistemic facts, while also better explaining motivations in epistemic actions. Although it lacks the resources to provide support for these practices from an external perspective, as is typical of the realist approach, this issue can be addressed by challenging the need for such external validation. The conclusions of this chapter suggest that non-relativist responses to questions about wisdom are viable. Nevertheless, these answers may not be as certain as traditionally anticipated.

In the previous chapter, we examined two types of arguments for epistemic relativism to determine whether the relativist approach can be relied on to resolve apparent disagreements in wisdom discussions. These arguments include traditional ones, focusing on the difficulty of locating the absolute epistemic standard, and new arguments stemming from special treatment of certain aspects of our epistemic discourse. Carter suggests that the traditional interpretation of epistemic relativism is not preferable to skepticism, which mainstream epistemologists generally reject. Moreover, the semantics-based theory has not been fully justified as a superior explanation for our knowledge attribution practices. Consequently, both of them fail to challenge the established view in epistemology. In contrast, I have argued that while neither type of argument offers a better account of epistemic features than the standard understanding, we lack convincing reasons to deem them as inferior. Therefore, they still pose some sort of challenge to the latter as potential alternatives. Nevertheless, Carter has a more decisive argument to dismiss epistemic

relativism, which will be examined and expanded upon in this chapter. The crux of this counterargument is to distinguish between the assessment-sensitive folk concept of knowledge and the philosophically important epistemological concept of knowledge, which ultimately provides a reason for epistemologists to pursue their own path.

This argumentative strategy is both intriguing and seemingly viable. After all, the standard and relativist views clearly lead to separate directions. Compared to refuting an opponent, it is often simpler to defend one's own choice. Yet, I will argue that this strategy does not assure the intended outcome. It remains unclear why a different perspective should be seen as inherently negative or deserving of outright dismissal. In other words, the distinction in question may serve to explain conservative epistemologists' rejection, but they still need a compelling reason to justify it. Interestingly, Carter's observation opens up a new avenue for us to understand the typical rejection of epistemic relativism in epistemology: there might be a more profound motivation to favor the traditional interpretation of our epistemic discourse.

The first section of this chapter will lay out this reasoning. The mainstream dismissal of epistemic relativism will be presented as reflecting a deeper clash between two positions — two conflicting second-order stances implicitly adopted by the two parties having the first-order debate. Carter proposes that a justification for the prevalent anti-relativist stance can be pinpointed at this level of discussion. While it will be contended that Carter's own argument is not sufficiently convincing, there is indeed a source here that potentially offers vindication for the mainstream rejection of epistemic relativism. The following section will then examine to which extent we can trust this newfound reason when confronted with theoretical challenges. The result is surprisingly two-sided. On the one hand, we have some grounds to resist the temptation of epistemic relativism and give firm answers to epistemological questions, including those about wisdom. On the other hand, these answers might not be as guaranteed as some philosophers might hope. This dual conclusion leads to both resolution to our disagreements about wisdom, particularly concerning wisdom's relation with truth, and new challenges that we need to consider.

1. Which Epistemology?

At the end of the last chapter, we examined Carter's response to MacFarlane's assessment-sensitive relativism. As Carter argues, MacFarlane's relativist account of knowledge is not perfectly immune to all criticisms, but is as defective as other epistemological theories with which it is compared. That said, Carter's counterargument is not yet decisive enough against this version of relativism, because even if his analysis is correct, such an analysis does not amount to the fact that more conservative epistemological theories are significantly better than their relativist counterparts, nor does it imply that relativism should be excluded from the list of possible options of epistemological stances sharing certain theoretical disadvantages with competing theories. Quite the contrary, once again, since mainstream epistemological discussion usually rejects relativists' reasoning without much explanation, it seems that they are somehow invited into a battlefield that often refuses to acknowledge their legitimate presence. Thinking more about this point may make us wonder: If epistemic relativism could have its own pros and cons just like the popular epistemological theories that we are familiar with, and is therefore not that different from other candidate theories of epistemic notions, then what is stopping us from taking it into consideration in mainstream epistemological debates in the first place? As the ultimate response to relativism, Carter points out that there is indeed a reason behind most epistemologists' intuitive avoidance of mentioning relativism as an alternative position.

In this section, I will present how this line of thought develops and its potential for further development to guide us to the next phase of this dissertation. But it should be noted that this section will reconstruct Carter's view with major modifications. I will begin with two arguments that Carter originally employed in opposition to MacFarlane's particular version of epistemic relativism, which can overall be seen as starting from the assumption that the acceptance of a relativist treatment of the concept of knowledge would result in the relativization of all knowledge-related epistemic concepts, to the conclusion that the relativist use of "know(s)" should be rejected as it would affect the typical epistemological use of "know(s)." I will argue that there are two weak points in this inferential link: First, as we will see shortly, to support the first premise, Carter illustrated how knowledge occupies a central place in epistemology and how other notions, which epistemologists are typically interested in, relate to the concept of knowledge. Nevertheless, this does not

conclusively suggest that epistemology is all about knowledge and the relativist treatment of knowledge would establish a new epistemology that is not the same as, and should be separated from, the old one. Subsection 1.1 will detail and address this concern. Second, and more importantly, as Subsection 1.2 will highlight, merely acknowledging that relativized epistemology differs from traditional epistemology is not enough to convince us to stay content with the good old days. To remain unperturbed in the face of the possible validity of epistemic relativism, we need additional and more compelling reasons. And as Subsection 1.3 will suggest, Carter's final critique of broader epistemic relativism, which focuses on a deeper incompatibility between the mainstream epistemological project and the relativist project on the second-order level, provides a hint about where to find such arguments. The discussion in Subsections 1.4 and 1.5 will show that while Carter's identified second-order reason does not adequately serve as the justification that we are looking for, his argumentative direction reveals a practical vindication for the traditional understanding of our epistemic discourse.

### **1.1 Consequence of Relativization**

The basic idea of Carter's counterargument targeting assessment-sensitive relativism is that the relativization of the concept of knowledge will give rise to an unavoidable globalization of the relativist treatment of all knowledge-related concepts, which are taken to be what epistemology is about, and thus lead to a kind of epistemology that is totally different from the traditional one. This would become a dramatic shift that itself announces a discontinuation of what are currently regarded as epistemological discussions, indicating that the introduction of epistemic relativism to what is now accepted as epistemology would, in fact, change the subject matter. Epistemologists who are thought of as such due to their engagement with conventional epistemological problems would then have grounds to disregard this new direction as a separate story. So, the first step Carter takes to establish his argument is to show how the relativist treatment of knowledge indeed has a considerable impact on the whole course of epistemology.

Some well-known cases in epistemological debates where other concepts are notably related to knowledge could serve as a good start for this line of thinking. For

instance, Timothy Williamson has famously claimed that knowledge is just evidence,<sup>1</sup> although it is against many, or perhaps most philosophers' views. Moreover, many reductionists often contend that various kinds of epistemic statuses can be reduced to propositional knowledge. Among these, "knowing-how" is probably the most representative, largely because of Gilbert Ryle's renowned criticism of intellectualism.<sup>2</sup> A moment of reflection may reveal that, in fact, most notions that we are familiar with in epistemology are at least usually considered as being linked to the concept of knowledge — being regarded as a species of knowledge (e.g., understanding<sup>3</sup> or wisdom), a component of knowledge (e.g., justification or any further condition added to the traditional "justified true belief" analysis of knowledge),<sup>4</sup> being valuable because of knowledge, or being established on the basis of knowledge, etc. After all, "[e]pistemology, characterized broadly, is an account of knowledge."<sup>5</sup>

The point of mentioning these other notions that are more or less connected to knowledge is that if MacFarlane's proposal of assessment-sensitive epistemic relativism is approved, it turns out to be quite natural for us to also apply his relativistic conclusion to those concepts that are knowledge-bound in some ways. If it is the case that evidence is just knowledge, or knowing-how and other more complicated epistemic states can be reduced to straightforward knowledge, or most other epistemological notions can be understood in terms of or in light of knowledge... and knowledge attribution is sensitive to assessment, then evidence, knowing-how, understanding, justification, etc., should also be seen as sensitive to assessment. But while it is understandable to infer like this, we may

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Routledge, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> For relevant discussion, see, for instance, Stephen R Grimm, "Is Understanding a Species of Knowledge?," *The British journal for the philosophy of science* 57, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of brevity in this dissertation, the examples mentioned here are mostly different from those used by Carter, but this should not affect our understanding of his strategy. Carter provides an extensive discussion of various notions that would be influenced by the acceptance of assessment-sensitive relativism, maintaining that "a truth-relativist semantics for knowledge attributions will force [...] a relativist treatment of at least the following: evidence, knowledge-how, understanding-why, justification, norms governing asserting, belief and action, intellectual virtues and epistemic values." (Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 204.). For more details, see *ibid.*, pp. 197-205.

<sup>5</sup> Paul K. Moser, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, ed. Paul K. Moser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 3.

also feel that it is extremely difficult for this process of globalization to pan out successfully, for when we say that we can characterize these notions with the help of knowledge, we seem to be talking about “knowledge” in its traditionally accepted non-relativistic sense. Surely, this does not equate to that the globalization is completely unable to work out or any of these accounts that relate epistemic notions to knowledge has discovered their indubitable conceptual relevance.<sup>1</sup> Yet, epistemology is essentially about theories of knowledge,<sup>2</sup> and concepts that have a role to play in epistemology are supposed to be somehow relevant to the main subject of this field, which is, evidently, knowledge itself. As a result, from the perspective of many epistemologists, the acceptance of knowledge attribution’s assessment-sensitivity would most likely not only influence the way we treat the very concept of knowledge but also those adjacent epistemological concepts. Therefore, relativizing all knowledge-related concepts is an unavoidable theoretical aftermath of relativizing knowledge attributions, and that does not sound like an enjoyable consequence. For one thing, while theoretically it is practicable to relativize each of these knowledge-related concepts, once we look at the enormous quantity of notions that are concerned, the task may seem insurmountable. For another, this would make it look like mainstream epistemologists have not fully anticipated the implications of relativism in their actual work, which could raise doubts about the value of epistemology as a discipline. Furthermore, this concern could extend even deeper, as it could also challenge the “values and norms that structure our practice of attributing and analyzing these notions,”<sup>3</sup> posing a significant threat to the very foundations of epistemology as a field of study.

While Carter’s demonstration of this step of argument is enlightening and intriguing, and his conclusion is mostly accurate, there are aspects of his reasoning that could be further strengthened. The first aspect to consider is that this is clearly inductive reasoning, and it is unlikely to cover every case. Even though Carter included many more examples

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<sup>1</sup> I am not following Carter on arguing that there is a connection between knowledge and (some) other epistemic notions, as this does not seem to be necessary for our current purposes. For Carter’s tentative justification for their conceptual connection, see Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, pp. 197-205.

<sup>2</sup> By this I do not mean that the fundamental epistemic good is knowledge. For recent debates on this issue, see, for example, Duncan Pritchard, "In Defence of Veritism," *Epistemology & Philosophy of Science* 58, no. 4 (2021); "Intellectual Virtues and the Epistemic Value of Truth," *Synthese* 198, no. 6 (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 205.

in detail in his analysis, he still admitted that his list of knowledge-relevant notions was “very much incomplete.”<sup>1</sup> And it is hard to see how this list could ever be completed since epistemology is not only a vast field but also open to innovation, at least to the extent that some kind of theorization of a concept that is not knowledge-related but is nonetheless epistemologically relevant is imaginable as well as permissible. What is more problematic, however, is that even if Carter’s induction could be supplemented by some rather satisfactory means, it would not immediately lead to what Carter actually aims at. This point should become more evident when we get to the next step of his argument, but before that, we are already able to gather certain traces from his choice of words. When the consequence of relativizing the concept of knowledge was foreshadowed, Carter specifically used the following question to implant doubts in his readers’ mind:

*Epistemological Ramification Question (ERQ):* if ‘knows’ gets relativist treatment, then since knowledge related intimately with other epistemic concepts, do any other epistemic concepts also need a relativist treatment?<sup>2</sup>

The section that comes after this, which is devoted to showing how other epistemic concepts would also be relativized along with the relativization of knowledge because of their relation to it, is named as “Epistemic aftermath.”<sup>3</sup> And Carter concludes that this “epistemic aftermath” is “a *whole sale epistemic relativism*: that is, relativism about many or perhaps even most of the notions epistemologists study, along with values and norms that structure our practice of attributing analyzing these notions.”<sup>4</sup> All these formulations purport to entice the readers to believe that the relativist treatment of *knowledge* would inevitably lead to an *epistemological* aftermath. In other words, what Carter is trying to prove is an *epistemological* thesis that the relativization of knowledge has something to do with *epistemology per se*. But his inductive reasoning always focuses on the connection between knowledge and other notions that play crucial roles in epistemology, instead of the connection between these notions and epistemology. Even Carter himself seems to have

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 205.



realized that the conclusion that his analysis could reach at this point is “*if* propositional knowledge gets a relativist treatment, then so will a range of other notions important in epistemology.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, even if we were to adopt Carter’s perspective entirely, we still need to add one more premise, which is that the relativization of all, or at least most, key notions in epistemology would reshape epistemology altogether in a relativist way. This would suggest that the epistemological concepts affected by relativism constitute an exhaustive list of all, or at least the essential, aspects of epistemology. This view, however, raises further concerns and complexities that must be addressed. (We may challenge this idea by arguing that the course of epistemology is not only about these notions, but also epistemologists’ research practice and the practical aspect of applied epistemology, which is naturally relativism-resistant because of the real-life requirement of making decisions, or that epistemology consists in a stable system that is immune to systematic relativization, even if it is possible to relativize every particular notion within the system when it is unrealistically isolated from the conceptual web, etc.) Therefore, Carter’s inductive reasoning might not be an ideal argumentative strategy since it struggles to cover all necessary cases and achieve his theoretical objectives.

These challenges are probably solvable at the end of the day, but, as the third and the last observation that I want to make here, there is really no need to grapple with them. In the previous paragraph, it was mentioned that epistemology could be conceived as a system of theories. While some philosophers may dispute whether epistemology as a system can be reduced to individual epistemic notions, it is widely accepted that epistemology can provide a systematic explanation of our cognitive activities. For example, “a notable epistemic subgoal shared by many epistemologists is to maximize the *explanatory* value of our belief system with regard to the world, including the position of humans in the world.”<sup>2</sup> Recall that epistemology pertains to an account of knowledge, which means that relativizing the concept of knowledge would necessarily affect how epistemologists describe and explain epistemic phenomena at a systemic level. Regardless of which epistemic concept an epistemologist may be examining, they are expected to

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Moser, "Introduction," p. 16.

consider the systematic explanatory ability of the entirety of epistemology, with the conceptualization of knowledge at its core. The relativization of this concept would therefore have significant ramifications for all aspects of epistemology, and it is impossible for anyone who genuinely cares about epistemology to ignore this impact.

In summary, while the reason that Carter presents to reach his conclusion may not be the most compelling, we can still attain his intended goal by turning to the systematic explanatory ability of epistemology. Compared with Carter's own strategy, which attempts to prove that all epistemological notions would unavoidably be treated similarly to knowledge, this approach is more effective. Not only does it better connect the initial assumption of accepting relativism about knowledge with what Carter requires for further developing his argument, namely that a relativistic treatment of knowledge would fundamentally alter the way in which epistemology explains human cognition, but it also simplifies the process of establishing this conclusion. Our next task is to determine whether Carter effectively convinces his readers to abandon the relativist project of epistemology.

## **1.2 Two Ways to Conceptualize Epistemology**

Upon reaching an affirmative answer to his ERQ, namely, coming to the conclusion that "if 'knows' gets relativist treatment, then since knowledge related intimately with other epistemic concepts," any other epistemic concepts will also need a relativist treatment, Carter plans to invite us to the second step of his argument against assessment-sensitive epistemic relativism — that is, to deliberate on this result and ascertain that it is not supposed to be accepted. It is not difficult to notice that since MacFarlane's major argument focuses on linguistic data, its success heavily depends on so-called shared common intuitions or commonsensical ways of communicating with other people. A question that we can pose here is that how robust an intuition must be in order for us to consider it as universally shared or something we can all figure out just by using our common sense. This is surely a natural way of leading the inquiry, whereas it is challenging to determine whether we do or do not indeed possess this kind of intuition. We shall come back to this point later, but for now, there is no need to worry about potential controversy, as Carter chooses to argue from another point: even if we do have such-and-such intuitions, the

concept of “knowledge” that plays a major role in epistemology has nothing to do with them.

To understand this distinction, we need to first look at Allan Hazlett’s proposal that has inspired Carter, which suggests a divorce between the epistemological concept of knowledge and the concept of knowledge that we find in ordinary language. Hazlett begins his argument by primarily characterizing two different methods of theorizing “knowledge”:

- (i) The post-Gettier method: In the epistemological tradition, a lot of so-called “post-Gettier” literature that seeks for a definition of “knowledge” gives lists of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge and test them in imaginary scenarios. What is examined here is whether readers’ intuitions about knowledge support that the character knows certain propositions.<sup>1</sup>
- (ii) The linguistic method: On the other hand, there are also epistemologists who are more interested in knowledge attributions, namely, how “know(s)” is properly used in sentences of the form “S knows p.” They develop theories of the meaning of “know(s)” in ordinary language and test them in stories by checking if we intuitively accept the character to say something that ascribes knowledge to others.<sup>2</sup>

The key difference between these two methods is the source, or the kind of intuitions that we depend on when we make our epistemic judgments. The fact that they are conceptually separable does not lead to the conclusion that they must generate different judgments. In other words, regardless of the chosen method (and regardless of whether they are combined with still other methods<sup>3</sup>), we are able to arrive at the same result. That said, Hazlett points out that there is a tendency in epistemological literature nowadays for people to fuse these two methods together and consequently commit a mistake, which can be presented as the following problematic thesis:

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Hazlett, “The Myth of Factive Verbs,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 80, no. 3 (2010): p. 497.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 497-98.

<sup>3</sup> For example, a value-based approach focusing on how to present and preserve the unique value of knowledge in the process of theorization. *Ibid.*, pp. 498-99.

(Factivity) Certain two-place predicates, including ‘knows’, ‘learns’, ‘remembers’, and ‘realizes’, which denote relations between persons and propositions, are *factive* in this sense: an utterance of ‘S knows *p*’ is true only if *p*, an utterance of ‘S learned *p*’ is true only if *p*, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

For our current purposes, I shall unpack Factivity in a more direct and understandable way: A truth condition is typically found in mainstream analyses of knowledge — that is to say, if a subject, *S*, knows a proposition that *p*, *p* should be true. This sounds natural to most people since we usually think that those who know something should have correct information about that thing.<sup>2</sup> Thus, many philosophers find it plausible to claim that whenever we say that someone knows (and also learned, remembers, etc.), an implicit truth condition is present. It is for this reason we require truth to be a component of the concept of knowledge — hence Factivity: to utter a true sentence<sup>3</sup> like “*S* knows *p*,” *p* itself must be true in the first place.

But one may immediately wonder: How come this constitutes a problem? Indeed, just as in the case of assessment-sensitive relativism about knowledge — If MacFarlane’s account accurately reflects our actual usage of the word “know(s),” it seems that relativizing all epistemic judgment in relation to “knowing something” is still the right thing to do, despite its potentially unpleasant consequences — And here is the crucial point that could be easily overlooked if we just focus on the debate over whether knowledge *per se* is relative or not without dragging relevant concepts into consideration. When we try to determine whether absolutists or relativists are correct in their statements about the notion of knowledge, it appears to be a discussion awaiting a final conclusion that has not yet been made. Suppose that we side with traditional epistemologists and choose to believe absolutism about knowledge, then when we argue with the relativists, we may feel reluctant to admit of their opinion, but it is still possible for us to give in. Nevertheless, when we shift our attention to other epistemic concepts, this feeling could be noticeably strengthened. To such a degree, even if we accept MacFarlane’s conclusion about knowledge, we are still

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 499.

<sup>2</sup> “On the standard view, believing is merely a state of mind but knowing is not, because it is factive: truth is a non-mental component of knowing.” (Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, pp. 21-22.)

<sup>3</sup> Although it will not impact the argument, as mentioned in the previous chapter, it may sound peculiar to many people, including myself, when an utterance is described as “true” rather than “appropriate.”

inclined to maintain our original opinion regarding other notions that should also be affected by an updated theory of knowledge. To put in another way, provided that we do accept MacFarlane or other philosophers' theorization of our everyday knowledge attributions, and then it leads naturally to the conclusion that we ascribe knowledge to people in a relativist way, we may still hold that in the epistemological context those notions linked to knowledge are not relative. Of course, one may further argue that the reason behind this is simply that it is too laborious for people to change their mindset, and this does not count as a properly justified reason for not doing what is ought to be done. But a more charitable explanation of such reluctance seems to be that we do not use these words in epistemology in the way that MacFarlane adopts, even if it makes perfect sense in his depiction of the ordinary use of them. And then another question will be raised: Are there two, or even more things that "knowledge" actually refer to at the same time?

The idea that the term "knowledge" is employed simultaneously in both traditional epistemological discussions and ordinary situations but denotes two entirely different things is really bizarre.<sup>1</sup> To assert this view is to suggest that any epistemological efforts aim at guiding our cognition are inherently doomed to fail. Such endeavors may provide some analogous lessons at best, but this is not how applied epistemology is typically approached or understood. However, it does seem that these two distinct ways of using the term "knowledge" correspond to two different conceptualizations of knowledge that theorists may employ. On the one hand, there is an epistemological concept of knowledge; or in Hazlett's context, "a factive concept (in the sense that nothing false can be known)" "of knowledge that epistemologists have been interested in since the *Meno*."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there is a folk concept of knowledge, or the concept of knowledge that we find in the ordinary language.<sup>3</sup> If it is the case that these two concepts mesh with each other, then everybody is free from concerns regarding the trade-off between them. Moreover, this is

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<sup>1</sup> For thoughts on the idea that we do not use the word "know(s)" in a consistent way and it is an example of polysemy, see, e.g., Matt Weiner, "The (Mostly Harmless) Inconsistency of Knowledge Ascriptions," *Philosophers* 9 (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Hazlett, "Myth of Factive Verbs," p. 499.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction that matters here is between the epistemic concept of knowledge and the folk concept of knowledge, so the debates over how exactly we should conceptualize knowledge from these two angles respectively can be put aside, at least temporarily.

particularly positive news for epistemologists, since their theories seem to successfully reflect the actual use of the word “know(s)” and thus possess more practical value. Nevertheless, this story is too good to be true. Now that we realize that there is a gap between the theoretically ideal concept of knowledge suggested by epistemologists and the folk concept that people have in mind in everyday conversation,<sup>1</sup> the first issue that we should be aware of is that to prove an epistemological claim by recourse to ordinary language is not necessarily a plausible choice. What is even worse is the second issue, which is what Hazlett wants to warn us about: Our daily use of “knowledge” does not even comply to the factive requirement. As a result, there turns out to be no support for the epistemological conception of knowledge from the ordinary language, regardless of whether turning to it for evidence is reasonable or not.

Hazlett’s paper shows in great details the significant disparity between these two conceptualizations of knowledge, but for the sake of brevity, I will only include what I consider to be essential for comprehending his ideas: There is some very common use of “know(s)” that can be followed by obviously false propositions, and we normally find it appropriate, rather than unacceptable. More importantly, sentences in which “know(s)” is used in this way can also be deemed true. For example, in the bakery case described in Chapter 2, when the bakery assistant claims that she knows that the cake weighs two pounds, her words do not give us the impression that they are inappropriate, even if we believe that her claim is false (since mass should ultimately be measured relatively). A possible objection to this view is that the assistant is saying something that only she herself thinks to be true. However, imagine that she accepts the “reality” that she is indeed mistaken about the concept of mass and then confesses, “Oh, I see, what I KNEW was wrong.” Her choice of words still makes perfect sense. Because now she knows that mass is relative and this proposition is true (at least in this imaginary scenario), with the law of noncontradiction in play, what she knew — that is, that mass is not relative — is no doubt false. And since the sentence “what I knew was wrong” implies that she indeed knew the proposition that mass is not relative, it turns out that she “knew” a false proposition. Nonetheless, her expression does not only strike us as being conversationally acceptable,

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<sup>1</sup> Hazlett also applies this criticism to “pragmatic encroachment” that we have encountered in the previous chapter. (Hazlett, “Myth of Factive Verbs,” p. 499.)

but also a true statement of her epistemic state, so this phenomenon self-evidently violates Factivity, contributing to a counterexample to it.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Factivity, being an intuitively appealing linguistic thesis, does not enjoy full support from linguistic data, and is therefore false.<sup>2</sup> Hazlett then suggests that there are more than two separate concepts of knowledge, and for epistemologists who concentrate on the factive concept, using ordinary language, where a non-factive concept of knowledge is prevalent, is not a wise strategy — we should accept that there is “a plurality of concepts of knowledge—each suitable to the purposes and presuppositions of the theorist who proposes it,” and “[t]raditional epistemology and ordinary language epistemology (as we might call the theory of knowledge attributions) would both be best served by going their separate ways.”<sup>3</sup>

If Hazlett’s argument holds, the violation of an essential feature of the epistemic concept of knowledge, its factivity, would constitute a reason to reject any contributing factor, such as the folk concept’s tolerance of non-factivity, especially when viewed from the standpoint of traditional epistemology. And here is where Carter tries to establish his analogous argument:

[...] Hazlett’s argument relies on the thought that factivity is *essential* to the concept of knowledge as studied by epistemologists, such that, a non-factive concept of knowledge is not going to be epistemologically interesting. And he’s surely right about this. But what *else* is essential to the epistemologist’s conception of knowledge?

It’s essential to the epistemologists’s conception of knowledge that it can support and sustain the practice of *epistemological discourse*. Let’s say a given concept of knowledge can support the practice of epistemological discourse only if, the debates that are central in epistemology continue to *make sense* were we to imagine that epistemology is centred around that concept so conceived; that is, debates that

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<sup>1</sup> This might remind us of MacFarlane’s discussion of retraction of one’s assertion, which would prove that MacFarlane’s version of relativism about truth makes a lot of sense, for it preserves both the law of non-contradiction and Factivity; we shall come back to this point later. For a more detailed discussion of examples and responses to different objections, see *ibid.*, pp. 500-03.

<sup>2</sup> Hazlett’s original proposal is much more ambitious. He tries to prove that a non-factive theory of the concept of knowledge in our ordinary knowledge attributions is better than other competing theories considering its simplicity, elegance, and explanatory power.

<sup>3</sup> Hazlett, "Myth of Factive Verbs," p. 522.

are typical of first-order epistemological theory could continue to take at least roughly the same kinds of shapes they presently take, in practice.<sup>1</sup>

In the preceding paragraphs, it is evident that Carter has three claims: First, he agrees with Hazlett that there is a rather independent concept of knowledge that epistemologists are interested in, irrespective of the ordinary view of what knowledge is. Second, he also agrees with Hazlett that such an epistemological concept of knowledge is factive. Finally, in addition to Hazlett's argument, he believes that this special conception of knowledge manifests itself in mainstream epistemological discourse, without which mainstream epistemological debates would fail to be meaningful. Clearly, Carter maintains that the essential function of the epistemic concept of knowledge lies in sustaining the epistemic discourse that mainstream epistemologists engage in during their debates, and the last point indicates that we can infer from standard epistemological theories what that concept entails (e.g., if it turns out that these theories more or less presuppose a factive concept, then it verifies the claim that epistemologists are interested in a factive concept of knowledge; and there may be still other properties not yet considered). Therefore, Carter's observation actually supports Hazlett's claim that in epistemology, knowledge is considered factive, because if factivity were not seen as an essential property of knowledge by most epistemologists, the structure of numerous epistemological discussions we are familiar with would be drastically altered (e.g., the standard view that knowledge is factive, but belief is not, therefore belief is different from and prior to knowledge).

In light of the above-mentioned observations, Carter develops a response to MacFarlane, which at first runs as the following argument:

- (1) Any relativist concept of knowledge is epistemologically uninteresting. (Premise)
- (2) The ordinary concept of knowledge is relativist. (From MacFarlane's argument)
- (3) So the ordinary concept of knowledge is epistemologically uninteresting.
- (4) If the ordinary concept of knowledge is epistemologically uninteresting, then ordinary knowledge ascriptions are epistemologically uninteresting. (Premise)

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 208.



(5) So ordinary knowledge ascriptions are epistemologically uninteresting.<sup>1</sup>

(1) is a premise that is analogized from the premise of Hazlett's argument, namely, that a non-factive concept of knowledge is not considered as an epistemologically interesting concept. (2) is the fundamental idea of MacFarlane's assessment-sensitive semantics for "know(s)" that we have seen in the previous chapter. From (1) and (2) we can deduce (3), and subsequently (4) and (5). Since it has previously been argued that adopting a relativist treatment of knowledge leads to a global application of relativization in epistemology, the resulting relativized epistemology will thus also be unappealing to proponents of the prevailing epistemological approach.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, (1) and (2) only share superficial resemblances with Hazlett's original premises and need their own proof beforehand. And here is the crux of Carter's strategy: he is not going to prove both (1) and (2), but only (1), because it is MacFarlane who is arguing for (2). The essential maneuver of Carter's response is not that this argument itself would give us a reason to preclude MacFarlane's relativism from the epistemological perspective, but once (1) is successfully vindicated, MacFarlane's effort to establish (2) will ultimately backfire, serving as a reason to reject relativism altogether. According to Carter, "the more compelling an argument MacFarlane can brandish to the effect that 'knows' should get a relativist treatment [...] the more reason the epistemologist has for setting aside new relativism on the grounds that the concept of knowledge of ordinary language, the one the relativist aims to show is assessment-sensitive, is epistemologically uninteresting,"<sup>3</sup> and this puts MacFarlane in a dilemma.

Carter's next move, as one can expect, is to justify (1), which I believe he successfully accomplishes. However, I will defer the explanation of this process to the next subsection. There are two reasons for doing so: First, it is closely linked to the subsequent

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 209. This argument is originally based on John Turri's summary of Hazlett's argument. (John Turri, "Mythology of the Factive," *Logos & Episteme* 2, no. 1 (2011): pp. 144-45.) Some changes have been made here for the consistency and readability of this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the use of the previously argued conclusion of the globalization of relativization here is different from Carter's own, though I consider them as essentially the same. In the original text, Carter uses it as a justifying element along with the idea that is going to be presented in the next subsection as a defense for (1). (Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 210.)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

discussion, and presenting it there will enhance our understanding of both (1) and the next phase of this dissertation. Second, and more crucially, I want to argue here that even if (1) is established, it does not provide adequate grounds for us to reject MacFarlane's brand of epistemic relativism.

Recall that Hazlett's strategy is: First, revealing that there is a thesis receiving widespread support from many epistemologists, i.e., Factivity that some two-place predicates like "know(s)" are factive in the sense that when a speaker attributes the predicate to someone else in linguistic practice, the proposition that is to be known must be true for the epistemic judgment to be accurate. Second, showing that the ordinary language does not actually have such a requirement that predicates like "know(s)" have to be followed by a true proposition, so the thesis cannot hold water. Lastly, proposing that epistemologists should refrain from seeking theoretical backing from the ordinary use of the terms they study. At first glance, Hazlett's proposal may appear to suggest that epistemological theories rooted in everyday contexts are irrelevant. However, what he actually suggests is that there is a divide between more conservative epistemologists and those who rely on ordinary language, and that these two groups should approach their methods separately to avoid confusion. That is to say, the conclusion that Hazlett has arrived at is that there are two (or probably more) kinds of epistemology, employing different methods. If Carter wants to argue that relativism is supposed to be excluded from epistemology (or put more mildly, relativism is epistemologically uninteresting), then there are two presuppositions must be defended beforehand: The first is that there must be only one united epistemology, which allows us to argue that relativists cannot establish their own epistemology in an epistemologically significant way if the currently accepted one remains unchallenged. The second, which even Hazlett appears to have overlooked, is the necessity of preserving traditional epistemology.<sup>1</sup> What Carter is arguing for is that if relativism seems unappealing to epistemologists, it must be due to some theoretical discord that suggests it does not conform to the traditional epistemological framework (the details of which will be presented in the next subsection), thereby rendering it unnecessary for

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, he has made it very clear that he proposed only "developing a concept of knowledge suitable for the semantics of ordinary language, but [not] that this project replaces or competes with traditional epistemology." (Hazlett, "Myth of Factive Verbs," p. 500, f.n. 12.)

epistemologists to address such concerns.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, relativism not aligning with mainstream epistemology has no bearing on whether relativist arguments are sensible or not. If there can be only one epistemology and MacFarlane has successfully proposed a relativist contender, on what grounds can we dismiss it instead of evaluating it as a competing theory? In other words, to accept Carter's conclusion that relativism is uninteresting to standard epistemology, and epistemologists can justifiably overlook it, we must presume that only the current form of epistemology should be taken seriously. Although many epistemologists may adopt this stance despite minor reservations, this approach neglects the wider scope of epistemology as a discipline. Dismissing a potential replacement for the prevailing paradigm should be based on reasons that are more convincing, for example, the candidate containing untenable falsehoods or being too insignificant to examine. It is essential for any discipline to remain open to alternative perspectives that could potentially foster progress or even change dominant paradigms in the future. While it may be feasible to set aside relativism, the rationale for doing so ought to stem from somewhere else. Since Carter's argument does not concern whether MacFarlane's ordinary language project is right or wrong in itself, it seems that what he contends is only that the folk concept of knowledge, and thus the relativist epistemic notions are epistemologically unimportant, and thus they can be disregarded. But even if we acknowledge that epistemologists have a greater understanding of concepts related to our cognitive processes, either due to their expertise, dedicated study, or ability to build a more comprehensive conceptual framework, it remains exceedingly challenging to ignore the significance of how ordinary people think about epistemic concepts. It would imply that epistemologists are granted a sort of absolute privileges, e.g., a unique kind of ability

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<sup>1</sup> This might be a little bit inaccurate or unfair, because Carter soon admitted that "at least some arguments for epistemic relativism (particularly, new epistemic relativism) *can*, and [...] *do* have an important kind of relevance to mainstream epistemology, even if more traditional arguments [...] do not." (Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 212.) Here, "new epistemic relativism" refers to MacFarlane's project and "more traditional arguments" refer to those that are clustered as the traditional arguments for relativism that he has criticized and were covered in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Therefore, Carter was going to argue that despite that traditional relativist arguments have nothing to do with mainstream epistemology, assessment-sensitive relativism does. And as we will see in the upcoming subsections, the kind of relevance that Carter had in mind has much to do with the major concern here, namely, that it does pose a severe threat to standard epistemology in some sense. However, this issue can indeed cause trouble for this response to MacFarlane's version of relativism that is currently under review, so what I am arguing for still holds water (and, as will be further argued later, even after taking Carter's further thoughts into consideration).

to access epistemic facts, and they do not have to take into account the perspective of ordinary individuals, whereas such privileges seem to be out of place in a field like epistemology, where the value of commonsense is widely recognized. Consequently, even though (again, as we will see in the following subsection) Carter is able to defend (1), it does not constitute an appropriate reason for us to simply brush aside the relativist proposal that accords with our ordinary linguistic practice, for it proves neither that the relativist counterpart is incorrect, nor that it is not worth considering.

At this juncture, it is beneficial to differentiate between two types of reasons. In general, reasons explain why we act in certain ways. However, as noted earlier in this dissertation, not all reasons that explain our actions are appropriate. To put it in another way, some reasons not only explain our actions but also justify their reasonableness.<sup>1</sup> And the problem with Carter's argument here is that the reason he gives us cannot serve as a justifying reason. That having been said, in the subsequent subsection, we will offer a more charitable reading of Carter's response to MacFarlane within his ultimate argument against broader epistemic relativism. In this argument, Carter posits that by analyzing mainstream epistemological discussions, we can identify essential features that must be preserved to maintain the accepted epistemological discourse. If epistemic relativism were embraced, it would violate these indispensable features, and this constitutes a compelling reason to choose traditional epistemology over the relativist project. Yet, as I will argue, Carter's characterization of these features is challengeable. Furthermore, it is important to note that a justifying reason for us to prefer traditional epistemology, which might be based on its familiarity within the philosophical community, is different from a justifying reason for us to reject epistemic relativism. Recognizing this distinction will lead to a very important

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<sup>1</sup> The current formulation clearly leans towards considering both types of reasons as internal motivations for agents, hence adopting a reasons internalism stance (but not in the sense of a position holding that something is right or wrong due to the presence or absence of reasons for action). This point will be revisited later, but due to space limitations, discussions of other ways to conceive reasons (e.g., reasons externalism) will not be included. However, this inclination should not be bothersome for those who oppose internalism about reasons, as the distinction made here can also be done in a neutral way, for example, by distinguishing motivating/explanatory reasons from normative/justifying reasons (Stephen Finlay and Mark Schroeder, "Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2017, 2017). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/reasons-internal-external/>.)

shift of focus of our inquiry, influencing how we consider the relation between the dominant features of our epistemic discourse and its relativist elements.

### 1.3 Second-Order Commitment of Epistemic Discourse

In this subsection, we begin by presenting Carter's defense of the key premise in his argument against MacFarlane, which posits that "any relativist concept of knowledge is epistemologically uninteresting." Central to his defense is the unveiling of the underlying second-order commitments that shape the epistemic discourse. As Carter puts it: "Metaepistemological commitments are revealed in first-order practice, though (unlike in metaethics) are not often given explicit expression."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, what we can do is "look to the action in *first-order* debates in mainstream epistemology in the service of characterizing what the *second-order* commitments are."<sup>2</sup> At this point, there is no need to be worried about all the details of this distinction (and also the term "metaethics"). Roughly speaking, "first-order" refers to epistemological literature and verbal debates through which epistemologists argue with each other, while "second-order" refers to the underlying views that support their articulated ideas and enable the first-order discussion to take place. A reason why we find these two terms rather unfamiliar in the context of epistemology is that we seldom pay much attention to epistemologists' second-order thoughts, but Carter suggests that there are nonetheless such things that we need to uncover now for the purpose of rebutting epistemic relativism. To begin with, Carter introduces two different but both reasonable methods to achieve the objective:

- (i) The method that locates second-order disagreements of first-order disagreements.
- (ii) The method that locates second-order agreements of first-order disagreements.

We may have learned from Hazlett's argument (and perhaps also some other cases that have been included in this dissertation) that epistemologists are inclined to think that they are arguing with each other about the same thing, and the ordinary conception of

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

knowledge is the common enemy to theirs. Taking this into consideration, (a) seems to be less promising than (b), because if epistemologists are not only having disagreement about first-order issues, but also second-order presuppositions of what is to be talked about, then it is hard to imagine how come they are still disputing over the same thing. For similar reasons,<sup>1</sup> Carter suggests that we adopt the latter method to identify the second-order agreements underlying the first-order disagreements that are central to epistemology. That said, regardless of the method we select, first-order disagreements are considered the starting point for our inquiry. Then, what precisely are these disagreements? According to Carter, typical first-order disagreements happen in situations where one epistemologist  $S_1$  affirms an epistemological proposition  $p$ , and  $S_2$  denies it. Carter identifies two characteristics of examples of this paradigmatic kind that would be useful for us to establish connection between first-order debates and metaepistemological commitments:

- (1) The *semantic* characteristic:  $S_1$  disagrees with  $S_2$ 's belief that  $p$  only if  $S_1$  has beliefs with contents incompatible with  $p$ .
- (2) The *pragmatic* characteristic: genuine disagreements typically feature certain patterns of linguistic data (e.g. explicit acknowledgement of contradiction, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

Before we go deeper, it might be helpful to clarify that quite a few expressions referring to the second-order commitments have been used in an interchangeable fashion in this chapter, for example, common ground and presuppositions. To avoid unnecessary confusion, in the rest of this chapter, a further distinction of use (but not of substance) will be made between what first-order epistemology presupposes and what its second-order, namely, metaepistemological commitments are:

### **Presupposition/Metaepistemological Commitment (PMEC):**

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<sup>1</sup> This may be a slight exaggeration, as Carter also provided a detailed analysis of failed projects associated with (a) as reasons to abandon it (ibid., pp. 3-7.). However, this analysis is not included here due to space constraints.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

One's *metaepistemological commitments* (at least, when they are not explicitly articulated) will be a matter of what one's first-order projects *presuppose*, and the commitments of these presuppositions.<sup>1</sup>

And then we have two kinds of presuppositions that, rather conveniently, correspond to the aforementioned two characteristics that bridge first-order disagreements and their background commitments:

(1') *Semantic presupposition* (in the Frege-Strawson tradition): One sentence presupposes another if, and only if, whenever the first is true *or* false, the second is true.<sup>2</sup>

(2') *Pragmatic presupposition* (in the Grice-Stalnaker tradition): Pragmatic presuppositions of first order disagreements are the common ground in such disagreements, as reflected through behaviour and use of language by participants to the disagreements.<sup>3</sup>

As is pointed out by Carter, (1') is problematic, especially because it supposes that there exists an entailing relation from second-order commitments to their corresponding first-order linguistic practice, but it does not appear to be what is at play when we look into our background consensus. In fact, we rarely reflect on whether our epistemic judgments being true has anything to do with our metaepistemic commitments being true — instead, we just take those commitments for granted<sup>4</sup> and speak out what we feel most natural to say. And it is for this reason (2') accords more with the reality and is therefore more useful. By combining PMEC with (2') we have the following thesis:

If disagreements at the first order in epistemology are ones where both sides to the disputes are disposed to behave, in their use of language, as if they believe some metaepistemic claim  $\sigma$  to be common ground in the context of their dispute, then  $\sigma$  is a metaepistemological commitment of both sides of the first-order dispute.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. Revisions have been made to clarify the “at least...” part for the coherence of this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Stalnaker, "Common Ground," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25, no. 5/6 (2002): p. 701. Cited in Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 10. See also Robert Stalnaker, "Presuppositions," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* (1973).

<sup>5</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 10. Originally italicized.

Put in another way, disputant parties would both presuppose and therefore believe certain claims that form some common ground for their debate to happen, and they take it for granted that the other side would also presume the same thing, and thus make the same metaepistemological commitments, which are reflected in the expressions they employ to argue with each other.

Carter then uses the classic debate between epistemological skepticism and Mooreanism<sup>1</sup> as an example to show how this approach works. In the previous chapter, we have considered some skeptic views that could facilitate our understanding of what an extreme skeptic's opinion about our knowledge would be like, which is more or less that we do not in fact possess knowledge as we think we do (because, e.g., in order to know something, we have to know what counts as knowing beforehand to justify our possessing such an epistemic status, but we cannot decide on the criteria of knowledge, so we have no vindication of knowing anything; or in order to prove that we know something, we have to defend our knowledge in a non-circular fashion in case we are massively deceived, which is impossible to be done, so we have no vindication of our knowledge; etc.). By contrast, a standard Moorean argument is usually composed by a proposition that we take ourselves to know something in everyday life, typically via perception (e.g., that "there is a hand"); a reasoning with the help of the closure principle or a variant of it that requires and also allows the subject to know what can be deduced from the proposition that she already knows (e.g., if one knows that there is a hand, she must be, at least potentially, able to know that a radical skeptic hypothesis does not make sense in a consistent way, and therefore she will be, at least potentially, capable of knowing that radical skepticism is wrong); and finally a conclusion drawn from above that radical skepticism should be rejected. This argumentative strategy has evoked many controversies, among which a distinct problem is said to be found in the first premise, which is that it has no proof of any sort of its own truth. Since skeptics would clearly deny this premise, the Moorean theories appear

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<sup>1</sup> Representing a cluster of responses to skepticism that is inspired by George Edward Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," in *Contemporary British Philosophy, Second Series*, ed. J. H. Muirhead (George Allen and Unwin, 1925). Note that what it targets can also be generic skepticism or skepticism about other topics, but here we are only focusing on epistemic skepticism.



question-begging. They do not effectively respond to the challenge posed by skepticism but instead build their counterargument on what they are supposed to be defending.<sup>1</sup>

Space limitations prevent us from delving further into the details of all these theories. For our current purposes, the central issue is how a Moorean and a skeptic could possibly ground their arguments in the same beliefs. After all, at first glance, they are two fundamentally opposing first-order views. Carter chooses to focus on one possible formulation that they will disagree about:

K(W): Moore knows there is an external world.<sup>2</sup>

Recall that having a disagreement about K(W) means that a Moorean affirms K(W), whereas a skeptic denies it. But while this appears to be a sheer difference in position, it can only make sense when they are holding different attitudes towards the same thing, otherwise they would be thought of as having meaningless conflict. Therefore, an implicit prerequisite that they share certain common understanding of K(W), especially of “knows,” is at play in the context. Many beliefs widely accepted across epistemologists are involved here. For instance, the factive requirement that Hazlett reminds us of — that is, that *S* knows that *p* only if *p* is true — is surely presupposed by both sides. For the Mooreans, they would not agree that their knowledge is not about what is true. And for the skeptics, as is noticed by Carter, “[i]f knowledge *weren't* taken by the sceptic to be factive, then by the sceptic's lights, knowing that *p* would be compatible with being deceived about *p*.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, if knowledge were not presumed to be factive by both the Mooreans and the skeptics, the debate would have been carried out in another way, because no real conflict would arise from different opinions on a non-factive proposition. So, knowledge being factive is at least one of the shared metaepistemological commitments in this debate. In other words, if the debate is to be preserved, this essential feature recognized by both parties must remain.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent development of this line of thought can be found in, e.g., James Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," *Noûs* 34, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237 Ch. 1 Endnote 42.

Clearly, counterfactual analysis plays a crucial role in identifying the second-order commitment to factivity. Can this method be expanded to uncover other metaepistemological commitments in wider epistemological discussions? The answer seems to be affirmative. Still using the Mooreanism vs. skepticism case, Carter specifies two more elements in their common ground that can be applied to epistemological study at a higher level of generality: The first one is the epistemic facthood, meaning that both parties agree and assume the other party would also agree that Moore in  $K(W)$  either knows or not knows that there is an external world. These terms might cause some confusion, so it is better for us to recapitulate the main differences between the following technical expressions before we move on to the second element:

- (a) (Factivity): This is a prevalent epistemological thesis that Hazlett finds problematic. Supporters of this thesis believe that whether sentences like “S knows p” are true depends on the truth value of p, and this feature proves that certain predicates like “knows” that refer to the relation between subjects and propositions are factive.
- (b) Factivity of the epistemological concept of “knowledge”: This is regarded as a property of the epistemic concept of knowledge. Within the scope of epistemology, “knowledge” is normally considered as a factive concept, in the sense that if “S knows p” is true, then p must be true.
- (c) Epistemic facthood: This is regarded as a feature of the epistemological statements. Those who accept the existence of epistemic facthood believe that there are facts on the basis of which epistemological claims are judged true or false. That is to say, there are certain epistemic properties possessed by epistemic agents or epistemic activities, and our epistemic terms purport to pick out and correspond to them. For example, when somebody asks that on what ground do we contend that epistemologists presume “knowledge” to be factive, we might respond to her that the first-order epistemological literature provides us with evidence. However, when she asks on what ground do the epistemologists contend that “knowledge” is factive, the phenomenon cannot explain itself. And it is at this point we notice that, regarding a disagreement, the two disputing parties usually argue with each other as if there were a matter

of fact that could justify one side's claim rather than the other side's. Therefore, when, say, an ordinary language philosopher and a conservative epistemologist debate over whether “knowledge” should be conceived as a factive concept, their arguments are based on their belief that epistemic facts exist and only the stance of one of them is favored by the fact, and the fact is either that knowledge is a factive concept, or it is not.

The repetition of “fact-” in (a), (b), and (c) requires careful consideration, because while these three terminologies should be distinguished from each other, they are somehow related together. (a) is a thesis about how the ordinary language supports (b), while (b) and (c) are tacit commitments that one could take in an epistemological discussion, albeit (c) operates at a more general level, for (c) may also be understood as a higher-order epistemological commitment that is at play in specific epistemological claims like (b). An epistemologist holding (b) may be called as a factivist about knowledge,<sup>1</sup> whereas a philosopher standing for (c) may better be referred to as an epistemological factivist, in the sense that she would take it for granted that there are facts that all our beliefs about the epistemic process, including (b), should correspond to the fact, and thus be evaluated in light of the facts. At face value, (c) implies that all the epistemological facts that correspond to what are discussed in epistemology exist,<sup>2</sup> and leads to the conclusion that none of our epistemological claims like (b) shall be ultimately decided by our thoughts or other psychological states — that is, that all of them are predetermined independently regardless

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<sup>1</sup> I am not using this term in reference to theorists who argue that facts (rather than, more traditionally, psychological states) constitute good reasons for holding beliefs. While there is no need to add further terminological burden, it is worth noting that tension exists between the traditional conception of beliefs and factivism about beliefs, which also influences other concepts involving beliefs, such as knowledge. For an introduction to relevant debates, see, e.g., the introduction of *The Factive Turn in Epistemology*, ed. Veli Mitova (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The term “epistemological facts” is occasionally used instead of “epistemic facts” to suggest that there might be differences between the two. For instance, there could be compelling evidence demonstrating the existence of certain epistemic facts about our cognitive processes in a scientific sense (regardless of what “scientific” means), while there may be no epistemological facts that epistemologists can rely on to substantiate their claims. However, delving deeper into this distinction is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Therefore, for the purposes of this work, the terms can be considered largely interchangeable.

of what we think about them, and as epistemologists, our job is only to discover these facts.<sup>1</sup>

While (c) is not often brought up in first-order discussions among epistemologists, it is tacitly accepted by most philosophers. The basic idea of (c) is very simple and natural: When we claim that “*S* knows that *p*,” our claim represents the fact that *S* *knows that p*, and so do our other epistemic claims, e.g., *S* is justified in believing that *p*, *S* understands that *p*, or *S* is rational/wise/etc.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that (c) is not concerned with the correctness of thinking in this way. It only tries to describe what philosophers actually do when they conduct epistemological debates. Since (c) could be considered as a metaepistemic commitment, once again, we are able to use counterfactual analysis on it to see if it states the truth: For a Moorean, a skeptic and their dispute about K(W), epistemic facthood is part of the common ground between the Moorean and the skeptic *vis-à-vis* their dispute if the following counterfactual is true: “were both parties to assume there was no fact of the matter whether K(W), their dispute would be relevantly different, as revealed in practice.”<sup>3</sup> And in his debate with the skeptics, Moore has said: “... I do want to emphasize that, so far as I can see, we all of us do constantly take proofs of [the sort Moore offers the sceptic] as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions – *as finally settling questions*, as to which we were previously in doubt.”<sup>4</sup> This claim is so strong that it must rely on some sort of hard evidence provided by things like epistemic facts, hence the presupposition of them being existent and available, which amounts to that if both Moore

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<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that epistemologists’ ability to access these epistemic facts is also presupposed here, but I will leave it aside because this assumption has no great impact on what we are focusing on.

<sup>2</sup> Epistemic facts are also considered as normative facts that “indicate categorical reasons for agents to behave in certain ways.” (Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 6.) This means that we not only view epistemic facts as the basis for making accurate claims about our cognitive processes, but also consider them as requirements for cognizing in an appropriate way, indicating that we should know in this manner, and we should not collect information in that manner. For example, the fact that we are wise if and only if we meet such and such epistemic conditions does not only provide us with the standard that we make judgment about one’s epistemic status, but also determines that there is an epistemic reason for us to be wise. (Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 6.)

<sup>3</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> George Edward Moore and Casimir Lewy, *Commonplace Book 1919–1953* (1962), p. 167. Revision and emphasis made by Carter, and cited in Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 13.

and his opponents were to assume that there is no fact of the matter whether K(W) is true, their original dispute would no longer make sense and should take quite a different shape. Thus, the commitment to epistemic factivity is unveiled in one of the paradigmatic epistemological debates, suggesting that other mainstream epistemological discussions might also possess such a second-order attribute.

The other element that Carter identifies in their common ground is another feature attached to epistemic facts. Some readers may have noticed that when Moore contends that there are hard proofs, something further has already been presupposed, namely, that such proofs are not only there, but also available to the disputants, which means that epistemic facts are objective in the sense that both Moore and his adversaries are able to argue against each other on the basis of their findings of the *same* thing.<sup>1</sup> As is remarked by Carter:

Put simply, they are both taking it for granted that whatever the epistemic facts are, they hold *equally for Moore just as well as for the sceptic* or anyone else and, as such, are not *merely* facts that hold just for one, or for the other.<sup>2</sup>

This feature of epistemic facts and epistemologists' commitment to it can easily be proven through another counterfactual analysis. Imagine that the Moorean and the skeptic in question have no faith in this objective feature of epistemic facts, then even if they believe that such facts exist, the exact content of them would shift with different observers' *assessment*. Consequently, engaging in debate with their adversaries would seem somewhat pointless, as both sides recognize that no "epistemic facts" are firmly fixed, thereby excluding alternative ideas. However, in practice, the Mooreans and skeptics carry out their debate as though one of them holds the correct understanding of the epistemic facts, enough to challenge their opponent's view. This implies a second-order commitment to the objectivity of epistemic facts in their debate, and, by analogy, in other mainstream epistemological discussions as well.

Recall that in the last subsection, it was said that Carter tries to establish that a relativist theory is epistemologically uninteresting. Although I maintain that this attempt

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<sup>1</sup> A further distinction between the fact being objective (a metaphysical claim) and the fact being accessible (an epistemological claim) may have been made here, but, again, I will let it pass for it has no significant impact on our main inquiry.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 14.

does not achieve what Carter ultimately aims at, which is to motivate us to reject assessment-sensitive relativism from an epistemological perspective, I do believe that he has successfully defended his claim itself based on the matter just discussed. The reasoning is sound: if MacFarlane insists that the attribution of knowledge (and as the aftermath of its relativization, all epistemic judgments) is sensitive to different subject's *assessment*, then he will have to admit that those who adopt such relativism about knowledge cannot commit to the objectivity of epistemic facts, and will thereby violate the common metaepistemological commitment of mainstream epistemologists. As a result, as far as epistemology in its current shape is concerned, a relativist account of knowledge is uninteresting. Nevertheless, as I have also argued, the fact that the second-order commitment that relativists possess is incompatible with what is currently taken for granted in epistemology does not constitute a justifying reason for us to give up relativism. To stay content with the current form of epistemology, we must look for something more fundamental that can provide a proper reason for us to believe that preserving the tradition is worthy, which should address the core concerns and offer a compelling argument for maintaining the traditional framework. Luckily, the exploration of second-order epistemological discussions reveals a promising avenue for discovering a potential solution.

#### **1.4 Metaepistemological Realism as a Reason to Reject Relativism**

Clarifying mainstream epistemologists' second-order commitments, namely, mainstream metaepistemological commitments, is crucial because once they are revealed, it becomes apparent that we cannot take them for granted. Although we may still be justified in relying on these commitments as we have done in the past, it is worthwhile to reflect on many questions about them, for example, how these assumptions have evolved into their current shape, how they are tacitly accepted by mainstream philosophers as starting points for their ideas, how uncovering and examining of these commitments will influence the way we engage in first-order debates, etc. Among these interesting issues, what Carter pays special attention to is that the two features of mainstream metaepistemological commitments that he points out happen to correspond to two

requirements that are usually found in a famous metaphysical position. On the one hand, we have

**Mainstream metaepistemology (MM):** A metaepistemological commitment of most first order-disagreements in epistemology is: a commitment to taking for granted epistemic facts with an objective profile.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, we have a model of

**Generic Realism:**

*a*, *b*, and *c* and so on exist, and the fact that they exist and have properties such as *F-ness*, *G-ness*, and *H-ness* is (apart from mundane empirical dependencies of the sort sometimes encountered in everyday life) independent of anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

If Generic Realism is accepted as a generic model of realism, any theory that satisfies both the existence and independence requirements of this model can be regarded as an instance of it. Therefore, MM turns out to be a realist commitment, which amounts to that mainstream epistemologists tacitly commit to realism in their discourse (at least, to the extent that these two features of mainstream epistemological discussions are focused on), hence a metaepistemological version of Generic Realism:

**Metaepistemological Realism:**  $a_E$ ,  $b_E$ , and  $c_E$  and so on exist, and the fact that they exist and have properties such as  $F_E$ -ness,  $G_E$ -ness and  $H_E$ -ness is (apart from mundane empirical dependencies of the sort sometimes encountered in everyday life) independent of anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

One small issue here is that many central epistemic concepts, e.g., knowledge, are commonly defined as including belief as a fundamental component, and it sounds strange to say that, e.g., one's knowledge is developed from her beliefs but is independent of her beliefs. Carter's response to this question is quite simple. He made a distinction between two kinds of dependencies — trivial and non-trivial — and contended that "beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Miller, "Realism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2021 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/realism/>. Of course, this is not the only way to conceive realism, but discussing other possibilities will be too much a task to be handled in this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 18.

mundane dependencies, there isn't any additional sense in which the relevant states of affairs' being as they are depends on, as Miller puts it, 'anyone's linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, or whatever.'"<sup>1</sup> Although Carter's observation here is a little bit vague (partly because at this point Metaepistemological Realism is a work in progress), what he means is, roughly speaking, the fact that our beliefs, use of language, psychological states, or more generally, our mind is integral to our cognitive process does not imply that epistemic facts are substantially dependent upon *us*. The existence of epistemic facts can rely on us (or more specifically, our mind, if it is considered as the main place where epistemic processes occur) in a trivial sense, as it is possible for us to imagine that epistemic facts do not exist when we, the species of human beings, cease to exist and there are no longer any agents that could instantiate epistemic properties. Nevertheless, it is also conceivable that epistemic facts are there, but not yet accessible to us. In the latter case, the existence of these facts does not depend on our wishes or desires, since they are not yet under our control. Therefore, epistemic facts do not rely on our minds in any significant way, and Epistemological Realism is safe from this sort of criticism.

Metaepistemological Realism, as Carter says, is a minimal form of metaepistemological realism.<sup>2</sup> For readers who are familiar with metaphysical discussions, no matter in a general sense or in a particular field, it should be easy for them to come up with a more robust version. Nevertheless, Epistemological Realism requires relatively lesser effort to defend. As long as we accept that there is something external to and not controlled by us serving as the ultimate proof of all those correct epistemic assertions, then Metaepistemological Realism is substantiated, irrespective of how we discover such facts.

Establishing Metaepistemological Realism is important because, according to Carter, it provides a more fundamental reason to reject epistemic relativism. Instead of simply measuring the theoretical advantages and disadvantages of two different sorts of theories on the first-order level, focusing on Metaepistemological Realism will make people realize that epistemic relativism presupposes something that is incompatible with mainstream epistemologists' second-order commitment, so there is no need to further

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 20.



distinguish one version of epistemic relativism from another and find a response to them respectively — epistemic relativism should be excluded as a whole in light of this ultimate reason. Here is Carter’s observation:

If such an incompatibility can be demonstrated, then it’s not merely that (typical) first-order projects in mainstream epistemology have no philosophically motivated reason to amend or abjure their positions in light of the arguments epistemic relativists have been able to offer; it’s that typical first-order projects in mainstream epistemology *can’t* do so – because these very projects *depend* on metaepistemological commitments that are incompatible with epistemic relativism.<sup>1</sup>

However, two issues arise immediately. First, even if we grant it that “[e]pistemologists by and large carry on in their first-order projects without taking the time to articulate the more general commitments operation in the background,”<sup>2</sup> this does not imply that epistemologists all have common metaepistemological commitments. In Carter’s response to MacFarlane, Carter rejects the philosophical import of assessment-sensitive epistemological relativism for it is not in accord with some essential presuppositions of knowledge of mainstream epistemologists. But there is a huge difference between the following two claims:

- (i) Mainstream epistemologists have common metaepistemological commitments.
- (ii) All epistemologists have common metaepistemological commitments.

So, the first issue with Carter’s argument is that, even if he is entitled to exclude MacFarlane’s theory from the list of genuine epistemological theories (a move that already appears questionable), he still needs to establish beforehand that mainstream epistemology has a sort of privilege in determining what all epistemologists ought to address. Furthermore, even if we accept this, there still remains a need to delineate a clear and valid boundary between the ordinary and epistemological concepts of knowledge. This distinction would protect epistemologists from accusations of holding mistaken beliefs about their own understanding of knowledge. Such accusations are pressing since history

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 214. Note that the above-mentioned privilege is not addressed merely by stating that epistemologists cannot make their metaepistemological commitments compatible with epistemic relativism’s tacit commitments. The problem could lie in the mainstream metaepistemological commitments themselves.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

has shown that numerous theoretical systems make sense on their own but make no sense in real-world application. When the lens shifts from the epistemological to the metaepistemological, these concerns become even more pronounced.

Undoubtedly, delving into these difficulties is a daunting task. However, what is more worrying is that even if this metaepistemological position is taken as a given, there is still the problem mentioned at the end of the last subsection — that is, the mere incompatibility between the second-order commitments of mainstream epistemology and epistemic relativism does not truly offer a justifying reason for us to reject epistemic relativism. The reason is that this incompatibility neither demonstrates that epistemic relativism is false, nor does it show why there is no value taking it into consideration. To put it in another way, for Carter’s counterargument against the broader relativist epistemological project to hold water, additional premises are needed to provide a compelling motivation. For example:

- (1) Metaepistemological Realism is true. (Additional premise)
- (2) The second-order commitment of any kind of epistemic relativism is incompatible with Metaepistemological Realism. (Carter’s premise)
- (3) Therefore, the second-order commitment of any kind of epistemic relativism is false. (From 1 and 2)
- (4) We should reject a theory with a false second-order commitment. (Additional premise)
- (5) Therefore, we should reject epistemic relativism. (From 3 and 4)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It might be argued that what Carter proposes here is not that we *should* not take epistemic relativism into epistemological consideration, but an explanation of why epistemologists, in fact, *do* not pay much attention to epistemic relativism, especially when we look at the more reserved word choice that he makes in the preliminary formulation of his tentative argument at the earlier stage of his book:

“[I]f [...] epistemic relativism is, as a metaepistemological position about epistemic facts, simply *incompatible* with even the very general *kind* of metaepistemological view which, as I’ve argued, mainstream epistemologists take for granted to get their projects off the ground — *viz.*, a kind of realism. And if this is right, then retrospectively, we should not be surprised that epistemic relativism has been more or less banished to the outskirts of mainstream epistemology, even if it remains popular elsewhere. Even more, if this metaepistemological incompatibility can be established, then it looks like there is a positive reason why mainstream epistemologists in fact *don’t* take the epistemic relativist seriously: in short because the presuppositions of their first-order projects tacitly exclude it.” (ibid., p. 28.)

I admit that expressions like “mainstream epistemologists in fact don’t take the epistemic relativist seriously” appear to be merely stating the fact. However, even in this cited paragraph, Carter is wondering

Premise (1) and (4) are added to create a justifying reason for our preference for the standard metaepistemological commitment over the relativist one. It goes without saying that (4) is true, whereas (1) requires some decisive proof. But this example argument serves merely as an illustration of how an argument could more adequately support Carter's objectives, and as such, there is no immediate necessity for us to defend it at this juncture. A curious question here, however, is that if Carter is promoting the acknowledgement of Metaepistemological Realism, should he not have realized that demonstrating its truth would lead to an argument like this and make it much more effective to persuade us to give up epistemic relativism? The answer is probably affirmative as we shall see shortly. Nevertheless, what is both unexpected and intriguing is that, instead of opting for a premise like (1), he introduces a different type of premise to provide the needed reason, as he notes:

In short, if there is a good reason to accept (at least some version of) epistemic relativism and the wider picture of epistemic facts that falls out of this view, then the epistemic relativist can't simply be written off as not *compatible* with mainstream metaepistemological realism on the grounds that the epistemic relativist is not a realist. *But* if epistemic relativism is *not* plausible, then, *a fortiori*, *neither* is the picture of the conceptual limits of epistemic facthood it recommends and with reference to which the epistemic relativist could be regarded as a full-blooded realist. If epistemic relativism is not plausible, then (interestingly) we lack any reason to think epistemic relativism is a version of epistemic realism — and correspondingly, have cause to think the view is simply *incompatible* with the kind of view that mainstream metaepistemology takes for granted.<sup>1</sup>

We can learn from this paragraph that Carter acknowledges, at least in part, the potential issue of (2), namely, that epistemic relativism cannot be rejected solely on the

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about whether we “should” be surprised by this phenomenon in epistemology, and as I have argued, even if we find it natural for epistemologists to set epistemic relativism aside, it does not mean that we should therefore be satisfied by such an attitude. Additionally, while “positive reason” is a little bit vague and can thus refer to many different things, the fact that the sentence where this expression is used is built on the previous one indicates that it should engage in a deeper level of discussion (otherwise it will be repeating what has just been said and becomes redundant), and when this part is reiterated in *ibid.*, p. 214. (cited above), it is rephrased as “a much deeper explanation.” As a result, the “reason” here can be reasonably understood as an explanation of why it is plausible for epistemologists to be negligent towards relativism. In short, I believe that Carter is trying to persuade us that epistemologists should reject epistemic relativism, even though this intention is not always explicitly shown in his writing. That said, if Carter indeed does not hold such a purpose, my argumentation can then be regarded as targeting an argument inspired by Carter's own with slight alterations, as our goal is only to examine a potentially common view that can be represented as this one.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

ground that it is incompatible with the commonly accepted metaepistemological commitment in epistemology. However, he perceives the issue as follows: Epistemic relativism could be thought of as a plausible variety of first-order theories that commit to realism. In that situation, the incompatibility arises not with all such theories, but only with specific versions, warranting further epistemological exploration of epistemic relativism. Indeed, given that Metaepistemological Realism hinges on only two main claims — the existence and objectivity of epistemic facts, and epistemic relativism encounters no issue meeting the first, it only needs to explain how it maintains objectivity to fall under the realist umbrella. Several points are worth noting in this particular line of inquiry that Carter chooses to address:

First, for epistemic relativism to be considered as a realist theory, being plausible seems to be a prerequisite. This presupposes that Metaepistemological Realism is plausible in the first place. Carter's focus, however, is not on the correctness of Metaepistemological Realism but on whether epistemic relativism can be classified under this already established second-order commitment. If relativism is viewed either as a viable replacement for the current realism-based theories or as a position not worth considering by epistemologists, then it appears unavoidable to presume that realism about epistemic facts is the stance epistemologists should adopt. However, Carter appears to be quite cautious regarding whether epistemologists are supposed to rely on their realist commitment. What he emphasizes is mainly the statistical fact that it is common among epistemologists to adopt such a view. Even so, recall that he does present Metaepistemological Realism as a reason for epistemology to exclude epistemic relativism. He asserts that first-order epistemological projects "can't" incorporate relativist elements because their inherent metaepistemological commitment conflicts with that of epistemic relativism. Based on the perhaps putative principle of "ought implies can," viz., that if an agent is obliged to act in certain ways, then it must be feasible for her to do so, the claim that epistemologists cannot integrate epistemic relativism implies that there is no legitimate expectation for them to do so. Therefore, if it is the case that the current shape of epistemology lives on Metaepistemological Realism and thus should not be required to take epistemic relativism into account, then Carter offers a justifying reason to supplement his original argument in the following fashion:

- (6) Epistemologists cannot accept a position that is incompatible with Metaepistemological Realism. (Carter's additional premise)
- (7) The second-order commitment of any kind of epistemic relativism is incompatible with Metaepistemological Realism. (Carter's premise)
- (8) Therefore, Epistemologists cannot accept epistemic relativism. (From 6 and 7)
- (9) One should not be required to do things that she cannot do. (Additional premise from the principle of "ought implies can")
- (10) Epistemologists should not be required to accept epistemic relativism. (From 8 and 9)

This tentative argument, while containing debatable details, is broadly sufficient for our current discussion. It highlights where the potential issue lies — that is, from the very beginning, why can't epistemologists accept a position that is incompatible with Metaepistemological Realism? The answer to this question that Carter has in mind seems to be that our first-order epistemological projects depend on Metaepistemological Realism, so if this commitment is challenged, then all projects developed on the basis of it will be overturned and consequently no longer exist. To put it in another way, the current epistemological discourse can no longer be sustained by its tacit commitment to Metaepistemological Realism. Nevertheless, as has been argued more than once, the foreseeable consequence that the current form of epistemology would collapse if relativist factors were integrated does not provide a justifying reason for us to dismiss epistemic relativism. Again, if it is epistemology *per se*, but not epistemology in its current state that we care about, then whether epistemological research of this day can be maintained will not have a significant impact on the way that we treat relativism — what is truly important is the soundness of epistemic relativism itself. As a result, even if Carter manages to prove that epistemic relativism is not plausible, he still cannot justify the rejection of epistemic relativism from the epistemological perspective via (6). Though, in such circumstances, he would effectively explain epistemologists' reluctance towards relativism on the grounds that they are unable to welcome it, as doing so would undermine their own projects, this rationale does not appear to offer a compelling justification.

The above discussion leads us to the second point. Regardless of whether Carter's original goal can be achieved, his next step involves examining the plausibility of various

versions of epistemic relativism. This investigation matters in our line of thought as well, because if certain forms of epistemic relativism successfully pan out, then from a purely epistemological point of view, they should be at least regarded as candidates for adequate epistemic theories. Previously in Chapter 2, we followed Carter and classified two major types of arguments for epistemic relativism, namely, the traditional ones and the new ones, and subsequently examined some representative arguments of each type with the help of Carter's criticisms of them. Roughly speaking, the traditional arguments anchor their premises on the claim that there is no decisive evidence indicating that only one absolute epistemic standard is in play, and, by contrast, the new arguments are developed on the basis of linguistic data that use epistemic terms in a relativist fashion. By now, we should be familiar with Carter's negative attitudes towards them, as even though these relativist attempts sometimes make valid critiques of the standard story of epistemic judgments, they respectively have their own flaws and limitations. Given such defects, it seems that we would not be motivated to spend any time improving upon them and eventually inviting them into mainstream epistemological discussions. Nevertheless, things turn out to be more complicated than they might initially appear.

As I have argued, while the traditional arguments for epistemic relativism have their issues, they do not seem inherently more flawed than the standard theories. Aside from the fact that many epistemologists appear to favor epistemic absolutism, a direct theoretical comparison does not make relativism look significantly inferior. Thus, this does not offer persuasive reasons for us to prefer the mainstream view to the relativist perspective, a point we will return to later. If we introduce practical factors like utilities and conversational conventions, we encounter the new semantics-based arguments for relativism. These arguments either find themselves, much like their traditional counterparts, in a deadlock with the standard account, or run into what Carter perceives as a dilemma: either they create an appealing version of epistemic concepts incorporating features like assessment-sensitivity, which mainstream epistemologists would find uninteresting, or cannot defend their theories properly, rendering their views untenable and thus irrelevant. More interestingly, despite the contention that it remains unclear why relativists are forced into making this difficult choice, the establishment of this dilemma raises another challenge

when the argument against epistemic relativism from second-order incompatibility is introduced.

Recall that when Carter reveals that epistemic relativism is not compatible with Metaepistemological Realism, the presentation of the latter is not merely a commonly accepted second-order stance (we will see more details in the following subsection), but a stance that somehow cannot be replaced by epistemic relativism's underlying second-order stance. However, if he leans on the aforementioned dilemma to discredit epistemic relativism, his reasoning seems inconsistent: At first, he suggests that “if we have compelling reason to embrace the epistemic *relativist's* picture of epistemic facts, then we have at the same time reason to insist on a certain conception of what is required to satisfy the [conceptual limits of epistemic facts].”<sup>1</sup> That is to say, if the conditional that epistemic relativism is plausible works, we will be motivated to embrace its conception of epistemic facts. But later, he proposes that even if assessment-sensitive epistemic relativism is plausible, its conception of epistemic facts remains uninteresting to epistemologists, because it is rooted in the ordinary, rather than the epistemic, concept of knowledge (and other related notions). As he argues:

The dilemma is that the more persuasively MacFarlane can support his thesis — that the ordinary concept of knowledge is to be given a relativist treatment — the stronger the case becomes for *rejecting* the illumination thesis, *viz.*, the thesis that the linguistic theory of knowledge attributions should guide/inform/illuminate the epistemologist's theory of knowledge. And, as I suggested, without the illumination thesis in hand, we have no reason to take MacFarlane's variety of epistemic relativism as one that should have relevance to epistemological theory.<sup>2</sup>

Once again, it has to be emphasized that what I am disagreeing with Carter is not that ordinary people and epistemologists in actuality conceive “knowledge” (and probably also other important epistemic concepts) in very different ways. The point is that this phenomenon itself does not necessarily provide a justifying reason for us to hold that epistemic relativism “should” not be considered relevant to epistemology, as long as our

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 29. Modifications have been made for the sake of the smoothness of writing. The revised part is originally “authority platitude, one according to which *intra-perspectival* authority is sufficient,” the meaning of which will be explained in the next subsection.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

interest in epistemology extends beyond its current shape. Be that as it may, what is more disturbing here is that it seems unreasonable to simultaneously require epistemic relativism to be plausible before becoming metaepistemologically acceptable, and to be metaepistemologically acceptable before being considered “epistemologically” plausible. If we indeed follow the hypothesis that a feasible variety of epistemic relativism has a chance to serve as a substitution for the currently mainstream epistemological theories, then MacFarlane’s project should be regarded as a new way to set up the requirement for objectivity, instead of being excluded due to its incompatibility with the present criteria. Consequently, even if we grant that the added premise (6) is promising, it still cannot effectively block epistemic relativism so long as an epistemic relativist theory makes sense to a sufficient degree. And Carter, in any case, cannot attain his theoretical goal just by introducing a premise like (6).

Finally, the ineffectiveness of (6) might remind us of (1), i.e., the premise that Metaepistemological Realism is true (or, more precisely speaking, the mainstream interpretation of it is correct), which appears to be a much better solution to the current situation. Why didn’t Carter choose that seemingly more effective justification? The immediate answer seems to be that (1) is truly challenging to prove. As Carter himself admits: “After all, maybe there aren’t any objective epistemic facts, and so what’s pragmatically presupposed by most first-order debates is just wrong.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, looking back at Carter’s arguments against various forms of epistemic relativism, it seems he implicitly assumes a premise similar to (1). Consider, for instance, the dilemma argument addressing assessment-sensitive relativism. Despite the absence of a justifying reason, it is also somewhat circular. Carter’s reasoning suggests that for a theory to be considered in epistemological discussions, it must be epistemologically interesting. According to him, to be of epistemological interest, theories must not be relativist. However, by definition, epistemic relativism (whether following MacFarlane’s interpretation or not) is always relativistic. Consequently, epistemic relativism is not epistemologically interesting and should be dismissed from epistemological consideration. This line of argumentation is only valid if it has been positively established that only non-relativist epistemic theories count

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.



as epistemologically interesting theories. A claim as such comes close enough to (1), but both would require substantial evidence to support. And, at this point, Carter appears to tend to sidestep the requirement, as his argument merely circles back to its starting point: epistemic relativism is epistemologically uninteresting simply because it is relativistic.

Although this appears to be an unfortunate mistake, we will see in a moment that it is not uncommon for realists to fall into the same trap for certain reasons, which will also explain the general reluctance to prove (1) in a straightforward manner. In this subsection, I only argue that Carter's argumentative strategy against broader epistemic relativism does not achieve its intended outcome due to its inability to motivate a rejection of epistemic relativism, and being self-contradictory as well as question-begging. The crux is that merely stating that mainstream epistemological projects rely on a specific metaepistemological commitment, without justifying the truth or higher plausibility of that commitment, fails to provide a compelling reason to dismiss conflicting views. A stronger argument against epistemic relativism would necessitate a demonstration of why the mainstream metaepistemological stance is superior in terms of its plausibility. However, I believe that considering the second-order positions of our epistemic discourse as providing a justifying reason does lead to a way out of the stalemate between the received realist account and the relativist account of epistemic features. In the next subsection, we will explore an alternative approach that incorporates insights from Carter's treatment of epistemic relativism. This approach aims to preserve the epistemic discourse in its current, yet classic form on the basis of its practical utility. We will commence by examining how Carter might still establish (2) even when a justifying reason for omitting epistemic relativism from epistemology is absent.

### **1.5 Problem with Metaepistemological Realism**

Having explored how the second-order commitment of assessment-sensitive relativism conflicts with that of mainstream epistemology, we can similarly apply this understanding to other versions of epistemic relativism, *mutatis mutandis*. The result of this application will generate an argument against the generic form of epistemic relativism from the mainstream epistemological point of view, particularly considering their different

conceptions of epistemic fact. However, as mentioned before, one might ask: Can relativists not recognize the existence of epistemic facts while also conceding their substantial independence from our minds? Might they not contend that multiple sets of epistemic facts exist objectively? Within the framework of generic epistemic relativism, which encompasses a wider range of specific theories, it is even more plausible for these questions to receive affirmative responses. At this point, it is important to note that Carter firmly believes that the answer is negative, because using the term “epistemic fact” in the relativist sense violates the boundaries traditionally set for the concept of epistemic facts.<sup>1</sup> “[I]f one claims to embrace the existence of epistemic facts but in doing so opts for a characterization of these facts on which epistemic facthood is, say, a radically mind-dependent affair, then *what one’s got left isn’t necessarily going to be epistemic facts anymore*. It might be something else, contrary to what this individual is telling us.”<sup>2</sup>

The conceptual limits of the notion of epistemic facts are not without basis. Drawing on Terence Cuneo’s analysis, Carter argues that two platitudes must be satisfied for something to fall within the scope of so-called “epistemic facts.” Therefore, to grasp Carter’s conception of epistemic facts, we first need to understand what is meant by “platitudes.” Put crudely, what Cuneo refers to as platitudes are fundamental propositions that we are supposed to rely on in everyday life, as they constitute commonsensical concepts that most grown people in our society, at least occasionally, possess. For instance:

Most adults of this sort have the concept of *being a colored thing*. And constitutive of our concept of *being a colored thing* are platitudes such as ‘(nearly) all objects that we see appear to be colored’, ‘things don’t usually look the color they are in the dark’, ‘one usually cannot tell what color an object is just by touching it and smelling it’, and so forth. If a person were not explicitly to believe or take for granted these platitudes in her ordinary activities of judging, questioning, blaming, praising, inquiring, predicting, and so forth, that would be *prima facie* grounds for believing that that person lacks the concept of *being a colored thing*, or suffers from some cognitive malfunction, or occupies (or has occupied) some highly

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<sup>1</sup> Again, this point is developed in light of Cuneo, *Normative Web*. We will have a closer look at it later.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 217.

unfavorable epistemic situation. (Perhaps, for example, she has been massively deceived about the nature of colors.)<sup>1</sup>

The mentioned concepts and their corresponding platitudes appear to be mutually defined. If there exists a concept that paradigmatically socialized individuals generally recognize, then the truth of many claims, statements, conditions for judgments, guiding principles for actions related to it will be taken as a given. We, along with other grown-ups, implicitly or explicitly agree upon these platitudes. Anyone deviating from holding these beliefs might be considered as lacking proficiency in the relevant topics or being incapable of addressing relevant issues. As a result, these platitudes, and correspondingly, the concepts that they constitute, have some normative force on us, in the sense that people should act in line with them. Those who do not or cannot adhere might be expected to adapt or might require additional understanding and patience as special cases.<sup>2</sup> Cuneo labels this cluster of concepts as “commonly conceived kinds.” While they might also be referred to as “common sense,” “background,” etc., the specific terms make little difference for our current purposes. What is noteworthy is that although commonsensical concepts consist in their relevant platitudes, only those platitudes that are most explanatorily powerful are central and irreplaceable. And even these core platitudes are fallible. It follows that, on the one hand, realists about a concept can accept significant changes in the concept’s content, namely, its relevant platitudes. On the other hand, a skeptic regarding a particular concept can still possess this concept in the ordinary sense, though we might initially take her to be not meeting the normative requirement.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Cuneo acknowledges that the notion of common sense characterized in this way could be understood as having a normative aspect. (ibid., p. 34, fn. 20.) It is important to note that, at this point, Cuneo does not consider this characterization of the commonsensical conception as the only possible answer to the question of what an ordinary conception entails. The other type of answer he offers concerns the elements of ordinary beliefs and practices that both realists and anti-realists engaged in the debate must consider. (ibid., pp. 32-33.) And it should be emphasized that no normative requirement is included in this latter type of response.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

Now, let us turn our attention to epistemic facts. Cuneo posits that if there are such things in our common sense that we consider as epistemic facts,<sup>1</sup> then they must adhere to two types of platitudes that shape our commonsensical conception: one related to its content, and the other to its authority.<sup>2</sup> The content platitudes show what people generally set as essential requirements for a platitudinal notion. In the context of epistemic facts, Cuneo suggests that they “tell us that representational entities such as the propositional attitudes display one or another epistemic merit (or positive epistemic status) such as *being a case of knowledge, being warranted, being an instance of understanding, insight, or wisdom*, and the like, only insofar as they are representative in some respect.” “Likewise, entities such as the propositional attitudes have one or another epistemic demerit (or negative epistemic status) such as *being a case of ignorance, being shortsighted, unjustified, or irrational* only insofar as they fail to be representative in some respect.”<sup>3</sup> Such a viewpoint is intuitively acceptable. After all, epistemic facts should inherently connect with our cognitive activities, which primarily aim at getting information from the world.<sup>4</sup> Seeking information of something can naturally be seen as representing that thing in our mind, as it is a process of re-presenting. Therefore, it stands to reason that epistemic facts center around representation. And a basic epistemic fact should be that the more accurately an entity (whether propositional attitudes or otherwise) represents the world, the more positive its epistemic status, and *vice versa*.

The authority platitudes, on the other hand, can be further divided into two categories. One sort of these authority platitudes offers reasons for various actions. Depending on how they are classified, these actions include intentional actions and non-

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<sup>1</sup> More specifically, Cuneo’s discussion here focuses on epistemic facts that exist in a realist or irreducible sense. This qualification is primarily included to exclude the possibility that epistemic facts exist in a way that would not satisfy the requirements of the content and authority platitudes. For example, one could argue that epistemic facts exist, but ultimately they are a collection of propositions about how human desires for information are fulfilled. While this claim may have some merit, it clearly goes against the authority platitudes, and as a result, epistemic facts would no longer be considered irreducible.

<sup>2</sup> Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 56. It is worth noting that Cuneo’s characterization of epistemic facts parallels his depiction of moral facts, which he develops based on Philippa Foot’s idea of conceptual limits.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> In the present context, I assume that my choice of words encompasses both the external world, traditionally understood as consisting of entities independent of human minds, and the internal world, which, conversely, is understood as shifting along with our mental activities but needs extra effort to comprehend.

intentional behaviors (based on the epistemic subject's status of consciousness), as well as straightforward epistemic actions and other actions that take epistemic evaluation into consideration (depending on the topic of deliberation). This contributes to a prescriptive characteristic of epistemic facts. As for the second sort, they suggest that at least some of these epistemic facts “inescapably govern our conduct.” Unlike hypothetical and institutional reasons, which arise only when we have specific goals to achieve or some institutions to commit to, and are thus escapable when we quit having them, any appropriately socially situated adult is supposed to act according to these authority platitudes, independent of personal desires, even concerns for social status. This implies that at least some reasons presented by epistemic facts are expected to be categorical.<sup>1</sup>

The content and authority platitudes seem so plausible that it is extremely difficult to envision a scenario in which they are not followed, yet epistemic facts are present. Among these platitudes, the claim that we cannot escape the influence of certain epistemic facts is perhaps the most controversial. However, even this platitude becomes understandable when we realize that we take the following views for granted: (a) Curiosity, as a basic element of cognition, is a basic survival and emotional need of human beings. (b) Curiosity is satisfied only when positive epistemic judgments are made. And (c) If there are facts, then judgments are supposed to be made according to the facts.<sup>2</sup> (a) and (b) go without saying, but (c) may sound arguable to some people. Several explanations support

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<sup>1</sup> Cuneo, *Normative Web*, pp. 58-59. This characterization is originally about moral facts, on the basis of which Cuneo develops his “moral realism of a paradigmatic sort.” By analogy, based on these two types of platitudes, we now also have “epistemic realism of a paradigmatic sort.” Note that by “paradigmatic,” Cuneo means that not every variation of realism is covered under this label. Another point to consider is that, to avoid equating immoral behavior with irrational behavior, Cuneo does not claim that a norm directly gives a person a reason to act; instead, it is assumed that when a norm governs a person's behavior, it “applies to that person and gives her a reason to act.” (ibid., p. 38, fn. 23.) Furthermore, there is no need to determine how epistemic facts give reasons to agents here (they may themselves serve as reasons, imply reasons, etc.), as it will not affect the current discussion.

<sup>2</sup> One might argue that (c) is not valid because we do not make judgments in this manner in reality. Such criticism can be addressed in two ways, depending on its interpretation: First, (c) is about how we should make judgments, rather than how we actually do so, and we should make claims that are indeed true as long as accessible facts exist, regardless of whether we have obtained those facts or not, or whether we wish to do so. Second, in real-life situations, epistemic facts might not be the only facts to consider when making a judgment on a complex issue; thus, the claim might need to conform to a fact that is not purely epistemic, and therefore does not entirely align with epistemic facts. However, it is always possible for us to demand claims to be made from a purely epistemic perspective, even when such judgments are not considered appropriate in real-life situations.

(c). For example, drawing from Cuneo, we might look to adults of sound mind in our society for justification. Alternatively, we could also justify the belief in (c) by invoking one's primitive responsibility for herself to survive, which is hard to deny given our innate disposition to sustain our physical body. While this might be considered as a tricky response for confusing animal instinct and human rationality, in which case we are taking something that we do to be what we should do, at any rate being an animal is an inseparable component of the notion of human, and it is thus fair to say that it constitutes a reason for, rather than causing us to keep living, insofar as that it is demanded by any kind of more developed human activities. And to survive, adjusting our cognition to the actual events in the world, namely, facts is essential. Therefore, (c) makes quite a lot of sense. It follows that, if epistemic facts exist, we should align our epistemic judgments with them. Combining (a), (b), and (c), it becomes clear why we cannot avoid the influence of certain epistemic facts (if they exist) during epistemic activities — because at least some epistemic activities related to fundamental survival require epistemic facts. However, whether cognitive activities for other objectives also have this requirement, or are influenced by this basic need is yet to be explored (more on this in the next section).

To take stock, realism, in a general sense, can be understood as a position that insists that facts about the subject in question exist non-trivially independently of human thoughts. But this is not enough for us to display why the second-order commitment of epistemic relativism is incompatible with the one that is taken for granted by epistemologists, i.e., Metaepistemological Realism. In each given domain, there are further conceptual limits for facts to correspond to in order to serve as the facts of that domain. Specifically, when it comes to epistemic facts, according to Cuneo, they must respond to the content as well as the authority platitudes. A relativist might argue effortlessly — as the questions at the beginning of this subsection suggest — that her conception of epistemic facts fits the existent and independent requirement. For instance, a relativist theory might go as that there is no absolutely unique epistemic standard, but there do exist multiple sets of epistemic principles (whether there are a finite or infinite number of them) in relevance with specific situations that are totally objective as their existence does not rely on how the epistemic agents think about them. When this stance is considered only in light of Metaepistemological Realism, it seems that the relativist understanding of the two

requirements makes some idiosyncratic sense. Now with Cuneo's analysis at hand, this particular interpretation of epistemic facts could be blocked: While relativism has no trouble satisfying the content platitudes and the first sort of authority platitudes, namely, the sort about their prescriptivity, it has something inherent in its doctrine that does not conform the second sort of authority platitudes, namely, the sort about their inescapability — relativism cannot conceive epistemic facts as providing categorical reasons, since these facts are already relative.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, epistemic relativism inherently conflicts with the mainstream realist metaepistemological position.

We have seen in the last subsection that Carter's argument faces challenges due to three major issues, namely, being unmotivating, failing to follow the hypothesis, and falling into circular reasoning. To address these, one would need to establish a premise like "Metaepistemological Realism in its mainstream understanding is true." However, these issues are not triggered by our finding here, and the conclusion that we just reached is not affected by them either. It is quite compelling to argue that epistemic relativism is incompatible with realism when the latter is equipped with the Cuneo-style conception of epistemic facts for several reasons: First, Cuneo's interpretation of the supposed features of epistemic facts are commonsensical. Second, these easily accepted presuppositions are essential to the realist second-order epistemological commitment. Third, they do turn out to exclude the unusual relativist story about epistemic facts. Furthermore, what has just been said relies on one simple conditional — if epistemic facts exist. Given that all discussions in this context hinge on this conditional premise, no definitive claim about the metaphysical or ontic status of epistemic facts has been made. Our focus remains on commonly held assumptions without delving into deeper evaluations, such as whether things are "epistemologically interesting" or favored by "philosophically motivated reasons." It is the overarching aim of such assessment that leads to both Carter's critique of epistemic relativism and the three associated issues outlined previously. And this is why Cuneo's characterization of the platitudes concerning epistemic facts deserves being considered separately from Carter's argument. That having been said, I now want to merge the two discussions for a more holistic exploration.

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<sup>1</sup> This line of thought is inspired by Carter's comparison between more limited perspective-relative epistemic facts and Cuneo-style epistemic facts; see Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, pp. 27-28.

To reiterate, Carter's original argument aims to vindicate mainstream epistemological projects against the rather unconventional relativist view. However, it at most manages to explain why mainstream epistemologists are motivated to dismiss epistemic relativism, without convincingly showing why they are entitled to react in this way. Nevertheless, one of his premises, which can be unpacked as a conditional conclusion, developed in light of Cuneo's portrayal of epistemic facts, is unfavorable to epistemic relativism and does make sense. Moving forward, our next objective is to find strategies to address the problematic aspects of the original argument, after distinguishing them from the more compelling elements.

We might start by considering how to fix the problems. A seemingly simple solution has been mentioned on several occasions. That is, demonstrating the validity of Metaepistemological Realism. Nonetheless, we have also noted the difficulty of anchoring our epistemic discourse to something that is assumed to be there. Asserting that epistemic facts, if they exist, should conform to the content and authority platitudes — which are central to the platitudes that constitute the concept of epistemic facts — has nothing to do with their actual existence. All we can confirm is that, in practice, we act as though certain epistemic facts are present, regardless of whether they truly exist or not. As Carter concedes: “[...] I concluded that a meta-epistemological commitment of most first order-disagreements in epistemology is a commitment to objective epistemic facts. This is of course not to say that what is presupposed by most first-order debates in epistemology is *right*.”<sup>1</sup> If the validation of realism were feasible, the prolonged debates would have ended long ago. The fact that proponents of Metaepistemological Realism devote considerable effort into persuading people to adopt realism (despite that many people may have already accepted it, albeit subconsciously) exposes the lack of concrete proof for the claim that “Metaepistemological Realism is just true.” Moreover, apart from the difficulty of proving realism, there is also a challenge regarding its formulation. In fact, when we talk about so-called realism, the first issue is usually not about its plausibility, but its precise definition. As mentioned earlier, Generic Realism (and by extension, Metaepistemological Realism) is merely one rather acceptable formulation. This point implies that there are diverse

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 209.



interpretations of realism. Then one might be curious about the compatibility of these various interpretations, and more fundamentally, the possibility of exhaustively displaying all the features of realism. Generic Realism has a relatively high degree of acceptance because it picks up two probably most prominent features of realism. Yet, they certainly do not capture everything we expect from this position. Specifically, if realism purports to encompass common intuitions, then its vagueness is inevitable since we cannot intellectualize every aspect of what we take as a given.<sup>1</sup> We might compare this situation with the case of qualia, as in certain respects, realism and qualia are similar to each other: both concepts employ terms unfamiliar to many, but seek to articulate something deeply familiar to each individual — the way things appear to us.<sup>2</sup> While it is possible to summarize some aspects of our phenomenological experience into concise propositions, fully elucidating the experience or formulating an argument for it remains challenging. According to Cuneo:

A realist conception of the world is something that, all else being equal, ordinary mature human agents whose cognitive faculties are functioning adequately in a world such as ours take for granted in their everyday doings and believings. According to the realists, so deeply ingrained is this way of viewing reality in our shared world picture, that it is difficult to find propositions more obvious than those constitutive of realism itself that can be employed to formulate a non-question-begging argument in favor of it. This, so realists aver, is why positive arguments for realism regarding the external world are so difficult to come by.<sup>3</sup>

In essence, the so-called realist commitment that statistically normal adults implicitly adopt actually refers to guiding principles derived from the manner in which these individuals cognize and conduct themselves in daily life without further reflection. Since these principles are already what realism consists in, it is hard to see how to vindicate realism using its own foundation without running into circular reasoning. And this is precisely the issue that we encountered in Carter's argument, where we struggled to

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<sup>1</sup> Here I stress only that not everything can be intellectualized, for example, subjective experience that relies on the agent's original identity, but I remain neutral regarding relevant debates over the possibility of intellectualization.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, "Quining Qualia," in *Consciousness in Modern Science*, ed. Anthony J. Marcel and E. Bisiach (Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 10.

identify a justifying reason to embrace realism within the evidence that we already do so. Unfortunately, at the same time, the alternative approach — seeking proof of realism’s validity from sources beyond its own scope — also seems unfeasible.

Given such difficulties, it might be beneficial to temporarily set these concerns aside and consider other approaches — for example, directing our attention to a different issue. In Chapter 2, we first revisited a set of arguments for epistemic relativism that are criticized for not being decisive enough to convince us that adopting the relativist approach would not simultaneously lead to skepticism. We then examined a new way to argue for relativism that is not typically considered in mainstream epistemic discussion, which led us to the current chapter. Although Carter’s responses to them seem different on the surface, they both rely on a crucial presupposition. Recall that Carter’s reason for rejecting traditional relativism relies heavily on the argument that it fails to distinguish itself adequately from skepticism, thereby making it an unsuitable alternative to the standard epistemological view. Here, skepticism is considered an undesirable consequence that we can dismiss without much explanation. And it becomes evident that Carter’s response to traditional relativism is also rooted in certain received features of our epistemic discourse — in this case, ordinary epistemic discourse being anti-skepticism. Thus, at the heart of Carter’s counterarguments against relativism lies the premise that the epistemic discourse accepted by most individuals in a particular group makes sense on the corresponding scale and offers us a reason to preserve and defend it against potential threats. This means that, in fact, the strategy used in response to assessment-sensitive relativism, namely, using mainstream epistemologists’ tacit commitments to epistemic realism,<sup>1</sup> has already been employed earlier when he addressed traditional relativism.

But from where is this reason derived? Take the anti-skeptic intuition for instance: If we continually seek a rationale for dismissing skepticism, a natural response is that skepticism contradicts what we take for granted in our cognitive activities, and the theoretical burden of favoring skepticism over the common stance is too much to bear. Admittedly, philosophers often struggle to explain why we are entitled to readily accept what we take for granted in epistemology; yet, in practice, we accept these presuppositions

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, “epistemic realism” and “metaepistemological realism” is used interchangeably.

without question and experience little difficulty in our daily lives, hence seeing no need to reflect on what could have probably gone wrong. In contrast, skepticism appears to be a position that is not only theoretically difficult to validate but also practically unhelpful. Adopting such a view would not change our behavior in real life (assuming we aim for a normal existence). Yet, it infuses our actions with constant doubt, which often manifests as negative emotions, deteriorating the quality of our life. Thus, it seems that skepticism is an inadvisable option due to its negative practical implications. Since traditional arguments for relativism can also lead to skepticism, it is sensible to dismiss them both together.

Keeping this in view, let us reexamine the issue of Carter's main argument against epistemic relativism. To simplify, Carter contends that epistemic relativism is either implausible or metaepistemologically unacceptable. In response, we have argued that there is no compelling reason for us to prefer the standard story over epistemic relativism just by comparing their theoretical plausibility, despite the fact that mainstream epistemologists are inclined to oppose relativism. And if epistemic relativism does present itself as a viable form of epistemic realism, then the value or even the validity of the currently mainstream epistemological projects is subject to reconsideration, as these projects adhere to a second-order position that is incompatible with a plausible alternative. However, recall Hazlett's suggestion regarding the relation between the ordinary concept of knowledge and the epistemic concept of knowledge, which is to allow them to follow separate paths — perhaps considering epistemic relativism as a replacement is too hasty. Our thinking might be clouded by the prior tentative conclusion that mainstream epistemological projects are at least as implausible as epistemic relativism. With a hypothetical, evolved version of epistemic relativism in mind, we may be misled into believing that mainstream epistemological theories do not develop as much and remain vulnerable, allowing this well-prepared variant of epistemic relativism to effortlessly defeat the commonly accepted version of realism. But it is important to recognize that this assumption does not reflect the prevailing consensus. For a defender of the common view of epistemology like Carter, the currently mainstream understanding of Epistemological Realism is not inherently flawed. When a philosopher like him is forced to admit that a convincing account of epistemic relativism exists, what they perceive as a potential danger is of a different nature. That is, instead of overturning mainstream epistemological theories, epistemic relativism may, in

fact, take or even appropriate something that previously belongs to the conventional understanding of epistemology.

The crux of the matter lies in our need to employ the concept of knowledge, namely, the purposes for which we use the concept (for instance, identifying reliable informants).<sup>1</sup> While these needs may significantly vary across different contexts, it is crucial to note that they motivate us to engage in epistemic discourse and subsequently provide justification for our use of the concept. When we theorize the concept of knowledge as epistemologists, we assume that our efforts will improve its usage (through clarification, explication, etc.) and make this concept serve its intended missions better. However, if epistemic relativism mirrors the folk concept of knowledge (or even just one of its features) and leads to a separation between the epistemological and ordinary views of knowledge, the utility of the concept will naturally be retained by the one that is more closely tied to ordinary conversations, where the concept is actually used. For epistemologists, this implies that the practical function of their projects, which center on the epistemic concepts, is taken away. Therefore, even if a plausible epistemic relativist theory does not necessarily replace the current epistemology, it undoubtedly poses a challenge: Epistemologists now must explain why their concept of knowledge (and other relevant notions) remains useful and worth preserving, even after losing its conventional practical significance. What Carter has in mind that serves to restore this value is the shared pursuit of a solid foundation among epistemologists. This pursuit, tracing back to Descartes, results in the widespread employment of the non-relative concept of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the entire course of epistemology seems to be a journey in search of a coherent explanatory framework for our cognitive activities, one we can trust with certainty. Such a foundational epistemic desire also addresses some everyday requirements, like identifying ultimately reliable informants. The focal point at this stage, however, is not whether this pursuit represents an indispensable need when we use the knowledge concept, but how the received absolutist concept of knowledge, along with its implicit commitment to Metaepistemological

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis*, vol. 42 (Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, p. 232.

Realism, fulfills these desires. This connects to the overarching question of how it might ultimately offer the justification that we are looking for.

At first glance, it seems that an appropriate response to this question should revolve around clarifying how exactly the epistemic concept of knowledge can address our diverse desires. Interestingly, this seems implicitly to frame the question in the future tense, as in “how will epistemologists’ use of ‘knowledge’ help (once we figure out how it functions)?” Yet, this reading might mislead our inquiry. So far, our discussion appears critical of Carter’s project, which centers on epistemologists’ tacit commitment to Metaepistemological Realism. We emphasize that there lacks a justifying reason for us to embrace it, and stress the difficulty in locating epistemic facts, which is deemed central to affirming epistemic realism. However, we have no opinion against the idea that epistemologists, in general, share a second-order commitment that is close to epistemic realism, which in turn supports their epistemic discourse. In fact, refuting the reliability of this second-order commitment is equivalent to admitting that almost the entire course of epistemology is a mere fantasy. This might be true, considering that history has witnessed numerous human endeavors rise and fall being no more than a mix of ambition and blind faith. But regarding epistemology in its current state, no one knows its exact fate yet. The information that we grasp now indicates only that it struggles to justify the deeper motivations underlying our implicit acceptance of this metaepistemological stance. However, one must not neglect that it still remains the default second-order stance for a majority of epistemologists. And it is important to note that this is not merely a phenomenon to explain. The fact that this second-order commitment is widely adopted by epistemologists already implies its utility, even if how it works remains unclear. Otherwise, it would make no sense that so many experts on knowledge keep working in this framework. This suggests that proving that our epistemic discourse operates on an objectively true foundation might not be the only path to finding a deeper reason to justify its preservation. Specifically, given the new understanding that our epistemic discourse addresses different objectives — be it ordinary goals like finding good informants, or traditional epistemological pursuits like laying a reliable foundation for knowledge — it seems reasonable to assume that the knowledge concept has served these purposes to a relatively satisfying degree for a very long time. This is because we have not felt forced (not more

powerfully forced than being pushed to consider other theoretical possibilities) to reconsider our metaepistemological position, or question whether it is replaceable by competing positions.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the fact that we continue to adopt a particular metaepistemological position somehow justifies its ongoing use from a practical perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Looking back at the core issue of this section from this angle, it seems that we have shifted our focus to a very different topic. Originally, our discussion began by clarifying the content of the second-order commitment that we adopt, and then trying to vindicate it as a position with that specific content. The challenge was that simply presenting this position without further justification or argumentation does not provide a sufficiently compelling reason for its defense. Now, we do have a reason to uphold the metaepistemological commitment currently in use, but the reason is grounded more in the commitment's practical utility regarding our needs, than in how the commitment's content could address them. Can we take advantage of this unique feature to account for epistemologists' inclination to reject epistemic relativism? This appears, at least *prima facie*, to be a viable approach, although it might lead to a change in perspective. In the second section, we will elaborate on this idea in detail and explore its implications for our treatment of the key questions regarding how wisdom should be theorized.

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<sup>1</sup> It might be tempting to argue that it is just unimaginable for our epistemic discourse to be replaced all of a sudden, and thus practically we have no choice but to continue relying on it (as many philosophers believe to be the case for moral discourse). But I doubt that the extent to which people depend on a particular discourse could be that deep. As seen in the previously cited passage from Cuneo, realists tend to argue that our daily actions commit us to realism, but this does not necessarily guarantee that people cannot abandon this commitment because of unexpected factors. But more importantly, I believe that there is no need to bear such a theoretical burden. Instead, it is sufficient for our discussion to proceed when we acknowledge the practical benefits of continuing to use the previous discourse until a better or unavoidable alternative emerges, or simply respect this outcome rather than deliberately disregarding it.

<sup>2</sup> We may compare this to a kind of "No Miracle Argument," which is well-known for Hilary Putnam's contention that "realism is the only philosophy that doesn't make the success of the science a miracle." (Hilary Putnam, *Mathematics, Matter and Method: Volume 1, Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (CUP Archive, 1975), p. 73.) Although what we are discussing involves the regularity with which we make epistemic judgments, and we do not attempt to endorse epistemic realism here, the rationale behind this idea still helps in the sense that if a theory works successfully in practice, then it is approximately true. Since the traditional epistemic discourse succeeds, more or less, in guiding epistemic activities and predicting epistemic outcomes, it comes close to a true account of how epistemic judgments are supposed to be made, regardless of what (realism or other approaches) could explain its fruitfulness.

## 2. From Metaepistemological Realism to Metaepistemological Expressivism

In the first section, we examined an approach to reject epistemic relativism grounded in its incompatibility with the prevailing second-order realist commitment in the epistemic discourse. This approach, however, has been argued to face several issues. Most notably, it appears there is a need for a decisively justifying reason, such as realism being true, to serve as a credible starting point to infer that the incompatible epistemic relativism should be rejected. Nevertheless, the debate between Metaepistemological Realism and epistemic relativism unveils the practical utility of our epistemic discourse, which is upheld by its second-order commitment. Regardless of this metaepistemological position's precise nature, if relativism proves to conflict with it, we have a practically justifying reason to, at least temporarily, set relativism aside. In other words, at the metaepistemological level, while a theoretically justifying reason to dismiss epistemic relativism remains difficult to locate, there might be one residing in the practical dimension of our epistemic discourse.

Although epistemic realism might address the concerns raised earlier and ultimately defeat epistemic relativism, it is crucial to note that the core objective of our exploration in this dispute is to determine whether we should theorize wisdom in a relativist manner. We are interested in the debates revolving around relativism, primarily because if Metaepistemological Realism is what the epistemic discourse commits to, and it clashes with epistemic relativism, then we should address our considerations about wisdom non-relativistically. Recognizing both the difficulties and a potential way out in the realist line of thought, the evolution of epistemic realism itself is not our primary concern. Nonetheless, by the conclusion of the first section, it seems that our defense of the epistemic discourse from realist premises and our actual second-order commitment are distinguishable. Is there a significant difference between these two stances? The answer to this question matters, because our practically justifying reason works only if the actually employed metaepistemological stance is incompatible with relativism, but what has been established is that epistemic realism, perhaps the mainstream depiction of this stance, clashes with relativism. If the answer is affirmative, then this incompatibility might no longer stand. Therefore, before aligning our theorization about wisdom with our second-order

discussions, we must first clarify their interrelation and discern if the reasoning is still applicable.

In Subsection 2.1, we will outline what we refer to as the currently employed metaepistemological stance in contrast to the purportedly received epistemic realism. Our examination will propose that they are not necessarily identical. Yet, they do similarly tend to sustain our epistemic linguistic practice and are thus in conflict with epistemic relativism. It will be argued that an account of the actually employed metaepistemological stance might not be burdened with realism's contentious presupposition of accessible epistemic facts and might even have its unique theoretical advantages. However, it also confronts its own challenges, especially the concern about the certainty that it could provide. We will delve into these issues in Subsection 2.2.

## 2.1 Metaepistemological Realism vs. Irrealism<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1.1 The Ontic Thesis, or not

To determine what the actual metaepistemological position is, there seems to be no better way than starting from characterizing our actual epistemic linguistic practice. A thesis that, in my view, captures the most salient feature of our epistemic discourse goes as follows:

**The Speech Act Thesis:** Some epistemic discourse is assertoric.<sup>2</sup>

In epistemic discourse, we frequently employ sentences such as “You know it,” “He is justified in believing it,” and “Knowledge is justified true belief.” We can refer to these sentences as “epistemic sentences” and the propositions they contain as “epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> Here I follow the convention of distinguishing irrealism from anti-realism based on its preservation of bivalence. However, this distinction does not have a crucial impact on the current discussion and is not acknowledged by every philosopher. In some quotations (or their relevant comments) in this dissertation, only the label “anti-realism” is used as that is what the original writer intends, though it conveys the meaning of non-realism (including both irrealism and anti-realism).

<sup>2</sup> Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 54. As we shall see shortly, Cuneo regards this thesis as one of the three paradigmatic epistemic realist theses, but I am borrowing it for representing a common use of epistemic discourse without further specifying a metaepistemological stance.



propositions.” Epistemic discourse typically consists of these epistemic sentences. However, they are not used as merely being presented. If we do have an answer in mind to an inquiry about, say, someone’s epistemic status, our response is more often than not definitive, tending towards either “She knows it.” or “She does not know it.” Even if we are not 100% sure of the answer, a more moderate or hesitant expression like “I think she probably knows it.” still implies that we have made certain epistemic claims or judgments determinately. In other words, we predominantly employ epistemic sentences assertively, indicating a clear and firm belief in their truth<sup>1</sup> rather than simply uttering them (whether to speak out, write down, or otherwise). This pattern is intuitively evident, because when genuinely engaged in epistemic discourse, we intend to promote effective communication (more on this in (ii)). More specifically, we aim for others to concur with our opinions. And in linguistic interactions, making assertions is more compelling than merely voicing personal thoughts without affirmation. As a result, given our inclination to be assertive with epistemic sentences, our epistemic discourse adopts, at least occasionally, an assertoric tone.

Asserting epistemic sentences signifies our trust in the truth of the epistemic propositions in question. This connection is not only conceptually evident as “truth” forms part of the definition of “assertion,” but also because if our primary goal in making assertions is to provide confirmation, then truth appears to be the most fitting criterion for the propositions we assert. Therefore, the Speech Act Thesis is closely associated with the following thesis:

**The Alethic Thesis:** The contents of some epistemic claims are true.<sup>2</sup>

The conceptual tie between “assertion” and “truth” is straightforward. However, determining the nature of “truth” is a complicated task. In fact, our discussion appears to shift in focus when we consider what counts as being true: Both the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis are quite intuitive, as what they offer are just highly abstract descriptions

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<sup>1</sup> "Assert," in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (8th (app): Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Again, this is formulated in light of Cuneo’s epistemic realist’s alethic thesis, which originally goes as “The contents of some predicative epistemic claims are true and, if the contents of such claims are true, then they are true in the realist sense.” (Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 55.)

of two prominent aspects of our actual practice — we assert in epistemic discourse, and we expect what we assert to be true. Nevertheless, “our actual practice” extends merely to what we actually do in epistemic linguistic practice, which is essentially our utterances or expressions. When we say that we make assertions and expect them to be true, we could be cautiously reserved, without taking any risks beyond depicting a practical phenomenon. For example, a statement like “They say it’s true.” in a sincere context implies “their” genuine commitment to the truth of whatever “it” refers to, but it still does not delve deeper, such as into whether it is, in fact, true. Within our epistemic linguistic practice, our assertion of expectedly true epistemic sentences does not necessarily concern a concrete understanding of the property of being true. This detachment is not immediately about the intricacies surrounding truth’s nature — a topic that has notoriously attracted long-standing philosophical debates, with varied definitions proposed; for instance, a claim might be deemed true if it makes a belief system coherent, or if it is verifiable and supported by all available experimental results, or if it proves useful or brings more positive results than negative results when implemented in practice. Instead, what the phenomenon mundanely suggest is that these considerations might not even be invoked, for we can assert truth without committing to anything beyond the claim itself.

However, one might wonder whether our expectation for a statement about the truth goes beyond its mere assertion. If such curiosity naturally follows our assertion, then it might be perceived as part of our ordinary practice as well. Indeed, we do intuitively tend to confirm the truth of what we say using direct truth-makers, such as facts that the asserted propositions could correspond to. If what we utter matches what is in the world, then the proposition contained is substantially true. As discussed in the introduction of epistemic facts, it is common to seek factual support for our claims, even if it is not yet clear how such facts are ultimately attainable. In this context, our natural inclination to rely on epistemic facts to verify the truth of epistemic sentences could lead to the following thesis:

**The Ontic Thesis:** There are irreducible epistemic facts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. We have introduced the meaning of “irreducible” in Cuneo’s context in the previous section. Though the understanding of it would not significantly influence our discussion here.

The Ontic Thesis is undoubtedly appealing when determining the truth value of epistemic propositions. Yet, its importance becomes even more prominent when considering its influence on our perceptions of the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis. If facts are accessible, they seem to be the preferred truth-makers. Thus, committing to the Ontic Thesis suggests that the other two theses could be better interpreted in light of epistemic facts. That is, some of our epistemic discourse is assertoric when we utter epistemic sentences to express true epistemic propositions, which are considered true because they correspond to actual states of affairs. Within the interplay of these three theses, the Ontic Thesis stands out as it informs our understanding of the other two. The notions of “assertion” and “truth” can then be seen as fact-based concepts, in addition to representing the practical aspects. In other words, this refined interpretation positions the other two theses as possible extensions of our engagement with epistemic facts: If we acknowledge our capacity to access epistemic facts, then we can form judgments, and, subsequently, assertions on the basis of them. In this sense, the Ontic Thesis serves as a support for the Alethic Thesis and the Speech Act Thesis, enhancing their credibility by presenting the phenomena that they represent as a rational extension of encountering epistemic facts. Moreover, given that, at the very least, our survival instinct prompts us to value facts, activities associated with the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis could derive additional significance from their connection with epistemic facts, rendering our epistemic linguistic endeavors additionally valuable.

As some readers might have noticed, the combination of these three theses, when fleshed out with necessary details,<sup>1</sup> aligns closely with metaepistemological realism, a stance with which we are now well-acquainted. In this context, this combination may be termed “paradigmatic epistemic realism” for ease of reference. The above discussion about paradigmatic epistemic realism sheds light on why many epistemologists have such a strong urge to advocate for the existence of epistemic facts: The Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis seem to be abstracted from the actions or behaviors we exhibit in real life. Yet, if we stop at this point and interpret them mundanely, no robust foundation supports the phenomenon that we attribute certain epistemic properties to entities (like beliefs,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 53-56. By “necessary details,” I mean the Alethic Thesis now needs to be understood in a realist way.

belief-based entities, agents, etc.) as if these entities genuinely held such characteristics. In contrast, the presence of epistemic facts offers a deeper layer that explains our epistemic linguistic practice with both reasonableness and meaningfulness. Without recognizing epistemic facts, our practices could proceed, but their underlying rationality and their potential for positive outcomes are unconfirmed. In essence, the Ontic Thesis endorses the other two, creating a cohesive trio that accounts for our actual practice with supplementary justifications.

That said, there are some concerns regarding the Ontic Thesis, even if we set aside the remaining contention about the existence of accessible epistemic facts. First, unlike the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis, the Ontic Thesis is less, or is at least much less overtly, related to our everyday practice. Committing to the Ontic Thesis would require some basic understanding of what epistemic facts are, where they can be found, and how we can acquire their information. To these questions, we seem to lack very good answers that warrant such a “commitment,” and many people might even deem such discussions irrelevant to our actual practice. Indeed, it is not evident that our epistemic assertions consistently attempt to reference corresponding epistemic facts. In practice, we usually make epistemic judgments without consciously comparing what we are evaluating (whether it is epistemic agents or other entities) to a set standard. This means that we do not typically assess the characteristics of what is under evaluation against something that is akin to epistemic facts. This lack of reference to relevant principles is also apparent when we reconsider our epistemic claims later on. Although we may engage in debates about the validity of our epistemic judgments, our arguments rarely hinge on specific epistemic facts to determine the truth of an epistemic claim. Consequently, the Ontic Thesis does not reflect the real-world process of forming epistemic judgments as closely as the other two theses. While they might benefit from the inclusion of the Ontic Thesis, and all three theses appear to coexist harmoniously, the introduction of the Ontic Thesis feels somewhat abrupt.

Second, even if we somehow accept the Ontic Thesis, there seem to be at least two ways to interpret its implications. On the one hand, we might believe that ideally, our everyday epistemic assertions should align with epistemic facts,<sup>1</sup> though, given the

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<sup>1</sup> When we sincerely participate in social communication. Although, I believe this qualification may be redundant because, without it, such conversations do not seem to be ordinary at all.

difficulty in making the match, this is a goal that we should strive for rather than achieve every time. On the other hand, we might employ epistemic sentences as if there were epistemic facts for them to correspond to, yet simultaneously acknowledge that we might not have any idea about, or even any desire to clarify, what epistemic facts contain. The key distinction between these two considerations hinges on whether the mere existence of available epistemic facts motivates us to act in certain ways. More specifically, whether they steer us towards uncovering epistemic facts and subsequently refine our notions of “assertions” and “truths.” Although the integration of the Ontic Thesis might appear beneficial for the other two theses, these benefits might not be invoked when we conduct epistemic linguistic practice that they describe. It is worth noting that the second interpretation does not suggest us to disregard any attempt to align with reality. Striving for factual correspondence or other devices to confirm truth is instinctive when making assertions. The point here, however, is that such instincts can be dismissed. As a result, the added Ontic Thesis is not intrinsically tied to our actual practice.

The first and second issues overlap regarding the mismatch between the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis as theses portraying our actual practice, and the Ontic Thesis as somehow detached from the practice: The introduction of epistemic facts does not seem to stem from the phenomenon of the epistemic discourse, nor does it seamlessly integrate into the phenomenon. At this juncture, one might wonder if the setting of an ontic thesis is necessary for understanding our epistemic linguistic practice. As a matter of fact, such a setting is not uncommon. We have come across some other interpretations of the terms “truth” and “assertion,” and they each carry implicitly their own ontic assumptions (particularly different truth-makers). Even in an extreme case, like one in which we refute any deeper meaning of “truth,” this could lead to a negative ontic thesis. Recognizing these diverse ontic assumptions suggests that while epistemic facts might be sought after by default, they are not the only possible option, based on which we can frame a thesis on the underlying ontological commitment of our epistemic linguistic practice. Given the realist Ontic Thesis’ burden of proving the contentious existence of available epistemic facts, and its misalignment with the other two theses, paradigmatic epistemic realism might not be the best approach in this regard. However, for the current purposes, this does not necessitate a search for a more suitable ontic thesis. What is more crucial, and also the third issue to

consider is that these ontic assumptions seem rooted in the further interpretations of the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis — that is, a *post hoc* interpretation of our actual practice. Interestingly, the first issue raised doubts about the introduction of the Ontic Thesis, regardless of its ability to account for the practical process. Yet, if we view it from the retrospective angle, then there emerges an understandable timing for inviting in a helpful explanation like the Ontic Thesis. In any case, whether we focus on the realist Ontic Thesis or broader ontic theses from various viewpoints, our initial epistemic linguistic practice might not involve such considerations.

These subtle issues are important to note. As discussed at the end of the last section, despite the apparent absence of concrete evidence for the existence of epistemic facts, the enduring traditional epistemic discourse provides a practical reason for its continuation. However, this kind of plausibility is primarily grounded in our actual practice, and thus only supports claims that reflect it — in this case, only the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis, but not the Ontic Thesis or other alternative ontic assumptions. Following this reasoning, our task now becomes clearer: we need to determine whether this practical justification for sustaining our epistemic discourse, which involves the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis without the Ontic Thesis's backing, stands in opposition to epistemic relativism. Considering that adopting all three theses amounts to paradigmatic epistemic realism, dropping one of them ushers in an irrealist stance.<sup>1</sup> Our subsequent exploration in this section, then, is about the relation between this irrealism —

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<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, various possible epistemic non-realist positions, and due to space constraints, I will only be dealing with this one type of them that is characterized by a lack of ontic commitment to epistemic facts. But it is important to note that this absence of ontological commitment can be understood to varying degrees. If we deny the existence of epistemic facts entirely, we will become nihilists, and this does not seem to align with the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis if we want to make any sense out of them. Therefore, in this dissertation, I adopt a more moderate stance that allows for a certain sense of epistemic facts (quasi-facts, virtual facts, etc.), although I maintain that ultimately there are no epistemic facts in a strictly speaking absolutely objective sense. Since if these so-called “epistemic facts” are not already there, they are obviously created through some form of construction, we may regard our tentative position as a constructivist one.

It may also be interesting to note that realism (at least in its paradigmatic form) is often associated with descriptivism (for it suggests that normative judgments purport to result in beliefs that represent or describe normative facts in the external world, and normative assertions purport to express such beliefs) and factualism (for it posits that there exist normative facts for normative beliefs to correspond to). The position that we are trying to specify here can be considered a variety of non-factualism, and likely a variety of non-descriptivism as well. However, for the sake of clarity, I will refrain from introducing labels that are unnecessary for our present purposes.

characterized specifically by holding only to the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic thesis — and epistemic relativism. Let us start with some preparatory observations before we delve further:

(i) First, we need to clarify why we are engaging in the discussion of the issue at hand, which primarily concerns the difference between epistemic realism and the actual metaepistemological position employed. One might wonder: If we have a practical reason to embrace the current epistemic discourse, and mainstream epistemologists have a consensus that realism is the second-order commitment that sustains it, then why do we still need to pay attention to their differences? This topic has been alluded to multiple times but has yet to receive a direct response. In fact, the answer is quite simple: We can only accept that epistemologists' depiction of our epistemic discourse is close to the actual one when we have already accepted that epistemologists are trustworthy. However, this presumption has long been in doubt, and such skepticism is growing stronger. Nowadays, many philosophers have begun questioning claims that epistemologists consider intuitive by examining these claims in experimental philosophical projects to determine if they are genuinely intuitive.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether the results favor the epistemologists' original judgments or not, what is crucial is that there is no guarantee (not even one that is convincing enough for their fellow researchers to believe) that the epistemic discourse operates as the epistemologists imagine. In fact, to demonstrate that we can trust epistemologists' judgments, there must be evidence of their expertise in discerning relevant issues, better access to epistemological truth, or higher credibility in making epistemological statements. Unfortunately, no such evidence has been presented thus far.

What is more unsettling is, as some readers may still remember, that certain epistemologists maintain that their understanding of the epistemic discourse differs from the ordinary one, suggesting that there are (at least) two epistemic discourses, with only the one accepted by them being appropriately titled as the “epistemic” one. This implies that some epistemologists not only claim to correctly characterize the readily accepted epistemic discourse, but also that only they can accurately characterize the epistemic discourse that works effectively in the orthodox sense — epistemic discourses that fit other

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief review, see, for example, Duncan Pritchard, "On Meta-Epistemology," *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2012): pp. 101-02.

ways of characterization may also satisfy some other practical needs, but not in the standardly epistemic way. I have argued that there is no obvious reason for us to believe so, and here we can add that this proposal seems highly implausible. By adopting this stance, epistemologists reject theoretical guidance from actual linguistic practice, yet they still aim to influence our everyday practice through pure theorization. This seems to be not only unfair, but also unhelpful. Even if the epistemic concepts developed by epistemologists serve a unique practical purpose that our daily usage rarely addresses, they still require testing in real-life situations to evaluate their effectiveness and efficiency. Therefore, it would be more sensible for epistemologists to continue learning from how well the concepts they conceive perform in practice, rather than considering their epistemological projects independent of our ordinary use of epistemic concepts. That said, I am not attempting to say that epistemologists are just wrong. Resolving this issue would require more effort than what can be provided in this dissertation. At this point, all we need to do is to examine what we can derive from two out of the three paradigmatic epistemic realist theses and what we can infer from this tentative stance's (probably but not necessarily different from paradigmatic epistemic realism's) response to epistemic relativism. Specifically, if the actual second-order commitment is similar enough to realism, we can reject epistemic relativism using similar reasoning. However, if these two metaepistemological stances differ significantly on this issue, we need to consider other possibilities.

(ii) Second, one may also wonder why we build a stance upon two theses that even paradigmatic epistemic realists would agree with. What prevents us from adopting a more radical stance, such as a more robust version of irrealism or even anti-realism? In fact, this choice is not made due to any realist concern. It is solely because these theses are reasonable and, as such, embody a high degree (perhaps the highest) of consensus among philosophers who do not significantly doubt the sense that our epistemic discourse makes. Just a quick look at our everyday epistemic language reveals the presence of both the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis: When we declare, say, that “Sam knows it,” we — or so we usually think — use an indicative sentence to express a belief, suggesting that we consider it a fact, or more precisely, we take what we are saying to be accurately reflecting what is going on in the world. The predicate in this sentence is “knows,” by



which we comment on the subject's epistemic status and attempt to convince our listeners that Sam possesses a particular property that "knows" purports to pick out,<sup>1</sup> although, ultimately, whether this sentence conveying our opinion is true is supposed to depend on whether it is indeed the case. At first glance, conducting this kind of epistemic evaluation seems to be not that different, or even indistinguishable, from how we report other kinds of judgments we make. For instance, when we say, "Today, it's hot," we use an indicative sentence to express our belief that the temperature we are feeling is high, and we try to persuade those who listen to us to accept that we are having the correct feeling, even though we could be experiencing an illusion leading us to misjudge the actual temperature (e.g., people can feel warm when they get used to a cold environment). Once we realize that, on the surface, epistemic predicates are used in the same way as more ordinary predicates, we might conclude that our epistemic assessments are made via the same process as more straightforward cognition, in the sense that the results of such cognitive processes can be (in principle) objectively verified. However, it is also possible to resist this temptation and focus on what we can be certain about, particularly in light of the difficulties in locating epistemic facts and making reliable judgments based on them.

But then, how can we understand the part of expressing our epistemic judgments without further factual support? In other words, without the backing of the Ontic Thesis, can we continue making sense of the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis? The answer is affirmative, especially when we consider the issue from a perspective that captures the essence of our epistemic discourse. According to Paul Grice, when we communicate, we implicitly cooperate to develop our conversations with shared purposes or agreed-upon directions, hence the Cooperative Principle:

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<sup>1</sup> This is about a minimum requirement for interlocutors to sincerely engage in a conversation: if they do not care about whether their interlocutor understands properly what they are saying, then it seems that they are not paying enough respect to their conversational partners or even the conversation itself, so they should be concerned with convincing other people that they mean what they say (whether or not they succeed in doing so is not relevant here). It does not necessarily imply that people should persuade those who they are talking to into sharing their opinions. After all, if we do not take epistemic assessments as judgments, but evaluations based on our attitudes, then a requirement for people to ask other people to hold their own attitudes will appear to be implausible.

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.<sup>1</sup>

Subsidiary to this general principle, there are four categories in which we have maxims that guide our conversations, which are respectively maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner: The maxims of Quantity require the participants to contribute only an appropriate amount to the conversation, the maxims of Relation require them to remain focused on the subject matter, and the maxims of Manner require their expressions to be clear and intelligible.<sup>2</sup> And finally there are the maxims of Quality, which go as follows:

- (1) Do not say what you believe to be false.
- (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to see how these basic maxims, which we implicitly agree to accept when we sincerely engage in conversations, are reflected in the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis. We expect both our interlocutors and ourselves to provide information that is true from the speaker's perspective and sufficiently supported by grasped evidence. As a result, we tend to make assertions in the epistemic discourse, demonstrating our confidence in our statements and conveying content that we believe to be true. Therefore, these two theses can be considered as enjoying widespread recognition for their role in rational dialogues, and embracing them would not cause unnecessary complications in addition to the problem that we are addressing.

(iii) Third, let us consider how the above comments relate to our current inquiry's main purpose. An easy way to approach the task is to begin by exploring the potential overlap between paradigmatic epistemic realism and our tentative stance. This means an examination of whether we can still reject epistemic relativism as epistemic realists do after abandoning the Ontic Thesis and their interpretation of the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis. As readers may notice, we treat the maxims of Quality differently from the other three sets. This distinction arises because although the maxims of Quantity, Relation,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

and Manner are also evidently present in our epistemic discourse, as in many other cooperative social interactions, they do not appear to play an important role when it comes to evaluating the plausibility of epistemic relativism. Embracing these three sets of maxims or not would not result in significant changes to the aspects of our epistemic discourse that are under their guidance (we are always supposed to offer a proper amount of information that hits the topic, which is epistemology in this case, in an understandable fashion). However, the maxims of Quality seem to have a different role in this respect, as sincerely claiming that something is true naturally implies that we do not expect it to be false in any sense, including being only relatively true under certain circumstances but false in other situations — and this is precisely the conclusion that relativists seek. Therefore, with the maxims of Quality in mind, it is unintuitive for us to accept a relativist treatment of our epistemic discourse.

Nevertheless, is it not the case that we tend to make assertions in all sorts of serious conversations, even those concerning topics that should be treated in a relativist way? As we have seen in the prior chapter, people often argue over tastes, even though tastes are inherently personal and lack an objective standard for judgment. Sometimes, people persist in making assertions during such debates despite being fully aware that there are no facts upon which they can rely. Should we not concede that relativism offers a fitting response to these situations, even if it may not be intuitively appealing?

We may once again turn to the practical reasons at our disposal. Given that epistemic discourse appears productive, while debates over tastes are not (indeed, what could even be gained by disliking other people's tastes?), we are somewhat inclined to believe that the intuitive rejection of relativism is effective. This is exemplified by scientists who engage in debates about the nature of the universe, intuitively disagreeing with differing opinions without considering the possibility of multiple, relatively correct answers, as their discussions often lead to new discoveries and advancements, unlike the case of personal tastes, which rarely result in any significant insights or progress. But this response does not seem entirely satisfactory, not just because it relies on past experiences without any guarantees that the future will follow the same pattern, but also because numerous possibilities might account for the apparent success of our epistemic discourse. Our inclination to engage in such discourse in a particular manner does not necessarily

serve as a major contributing factor. In fact, it may even have negative impacts, with the discourse only seemingly working due to other elements that compensate for this loss by coincidence or design. Consequently, we must consider two aspects in the following discussion of the relationship between the less contentious characterization of the epistemic discourse and epistemic relativism: one from the perspective of how long the current epistemic discourse can be expected to last, and the other from the perspective of how strong their relation's influence can have on our evaluation of epistemic relativism's plausibility.

Taking into account the three points mentioned above, our task becomes clearer: We aim to find a standpoint from which to assess the plausibility of epistemic relativism by borrowing from the more persuasive elements of paradigmatic epistemic realism. This will help us outline a more intuitively appealing second-order position, in line with our widely shared epistemic linguistic practice. We should then delve into the specifics of this stance and examine whether our practically helpful epistemic discourse, on this basis, tends to reject epistemic relativism. If epistemic relativism proves incompatible with this metaepistemological position, we will have a practically justifying reason to put it aside (at least for now). Otherwise, we must consider the converse. At the same time, we should be mindful of two unresolved issues: the sustainability of the practical reason being developed based on past experiences, and the potency of our epistemic discourse's potential inclination towards rejecting epistemic relativism. Since our tentative stance draws significantly from paradigmatic epistemic realism, it is beneficial to begin our inquiry by comparing the two and learning from their similarities as well as differences. This comparison, along with further exploration will be undertaken in the next sub-subsection.

### 2.1.2 Irrealism: An Alternative

One approach to characterizing a new viewpoint in relation to a specific position involves concentrating on addressing the latter's problematic aspects. Thus, to clarify the stance we aim to represent, we may start with a comparison between paradigmatic epistemic realism (comprising the Ontic Thesis, the Speech Act Thesis, and the Alethic Thesis) and the second-order position we attempt to describe (potentially abandoning the

Ontic Thesis but retaining the other two), particularly focusing on the disputes surrounding the Ontic Thesis. That having been said, even if we narrow our focus to a position that decidedly denies the Ontic Thesis while adopting the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis (in their different interpretations), it remains difficult to precisely pinpoint what we are discussing. Fortunately, the objective of this section, and the outcome that we will reach in this sub-subsection, is not to detail the exact nature of the selected theses or to identify the most plausible theory emerging from them. Instead, our primary goal is to ascertain whether we can rule out epistemic relativism's impact on our theorization of wisdom. With this in mind, we could reframe the goal of our inquiry to regard the Ontic Thesis as primarily occupying a central role in realists' rejection of epistemic relativism, though it faces various challenges.

Thus far, we have observed a painful lack of concrete evidence supporting the existence of epistemic facts, but we have not explicitly criticized the realist presumption of their existence either. We tend to avoid direct engagement with this contentious issue because our aim is to construct our arguments based on widely accepted beliefs rather than unproven assumptions about the existence or non-existence of epistemic facts. However, it is still possible, or even feasible to find criticisms that overtly challenge the existence of epistemic facts in the literature. For instance, John Mackie has famously argued that there are two primary types of counterarguments against the objectivity of values: the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. The former focuses on how moral thoughts differ dramatically across cultures and time periods, and how moral disagreements seem so intractable that such a phenomenon can only be explained if there are no moral facts to reference. The latter, more significant argument consists of two parts: first, the metaphysical existence of moral facts appears too unique to be understood, as they can compel us to act or refrain from acting, unlike anything else in the universe; and second, the epistemic access to moral facts is equally difficult to discern since normative facts<sup>1</sup> are nothing close to ordinary objects that we can perceive or cognize in the natural world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By "normative facts," I mean simply facts with normative force that can tell us to do or not to do something. It can also be considered as a replacement of "both moral and epistemic facts" in this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin UK, 1990), pp. 36-39. Cf. Moore has famously claimed that "[...] I do not deny that good is a property of certain natural objects: certain of them,

Although Mackie's intention with these arguments is to assert that there are no moral facts and that the moral discourse relying on their existence is fundamentally flawed (hence an error theory of the moral discourse), it is evident how such arguments can also apply to epistemic facts with only minor adjustments (a significant portion of the last chapter was dedicated to the exploration of epistemic disagreements, and the authority platitudes of epistemic facts, which maintain that epistemic facts grant us unique categorical reasons for taking action, were presented in the previous section). If these arguments hold water, then it seems plausible for us to deny the existence of epistemic facts as well. However, readers of this dissertation may immediately question: Have we not already mentioned certain epistemic facts? For example, those that are relevant on a primitive survival level. Indeed, it is quite challenging for an error theory of epistemic discourse to succeed entirely, as claiming that we always "know" specific things is a far more certain assertion than stating that we are always moral beings. Consequently, there must be some evaluative framework that can serve as a standard for us to make such judgments. More importantly, stating that we have an epistemic reason to believe that there is no categorical epistemic reason seems to be self-defeating.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, many philosophers argue against the error theory of moral discourse by establishing a certain parity or analogy between epistemic and moral discourse, and subsequently developing so-called "companions in guilt" arguments to prove the existence of moral facts/reasons in light of the seemingly guaranteed existence of epistemic facts/reasons.

A comparison between our typical attribution of knowing and being moral to others might reveal that saying "someone knows something" is generally more certain than claiming "someone did the right thing." The reason behind this is that, in a commonsense manner, we consider other people to be cognitive beings who "know" something, whatever that term may mean. By contrast, being moral or not is not a characteristic that is deeply linked to the existence of humans *per se*. For example, there are numerous stories about humans living as animals without any involvement in human societies. Setting aside the

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I think, *are good*; and yet I have said that 'good' itself is not a natural property." (George Edward Moore and Thomas Baldwin, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 93.)

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 118., Nishi Shah, "Can Reasons for Belief Be Debunked?," (2011), pp. 97-98.).

validity of such stories, we encounter no difficulty in accepting that these uncivilized creatures who resemble us can cognize and interact with their environments in a similar fashion. However, when it comes to determining whether they are appropriate candidates for moral judgment, more complex issues arise, and many of us would lean towards a negative answer. It is challenging to apply our moral frameworks to individuals who have not been socialized within human societies, as their actions and behaviors may be driven by survival instincts rather than a conscious understanding of what is “right” and “wrong.”

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is a distinction between animal knowledge and knowledge unique to human beings,<sup>1</sup> with mainstream epistemological discussions focusing more on the latter. The epistemic facts considered in mainstream epistemological discussions often possess a unique normative quality, distinct from being, very roughly, merely a cognitive function common to humans and animals.<sup>2</sup> These “epistemic facts” are not simply imposed on us through our sensory organs (whether exclusive to humans or shared with other animals) and are not subject to scientific investigation like other aspects of the material world. For instance, knowledge being supposed to be anti-luck or anti-risk. Bringing up this issue might remind people of topics like physicalism, which in its broad sense tries to reduce human minds to purely natural cognitive processes, but what is crucial here is simply the fact that people are using or tacitly committing to the idea that epistemic facts are normative in predominant epistemological debates, enabling a comparison between epistemic facts and moral facts in this respect. However, if one sticks to a philosophical stance that limits the scope of epistemic facts to universalizable phenomenon among both socialized and unsocialized creatures, the “companions in guilt” arguments will quickly lose their appeal.<sup>3</sup> In essence,

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<sup>1</sup> We may consider Ernest Sosa’s distinction between animal knowledge and reflective knowledge for illustrative purposes. In Sosa’s view, animal knowledge requires only apt belief *simpliciter* (true belief formed competently), while reflective knowledge requires apt belief aptly noted. (Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume I*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 34-35.)

<sup>2</sup> Contra, for example, Quine’s proposal that “[e]pistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science.” (Willard V Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (USA: Columbia University Press, 1969).)

<sup>3</sup> Of course, it is also possible for a philosopher to claim that moral facts consist in natural facts and make the comparison between epistemic facts and moral facts comparable in this naturalistic sense, but that

the concept of knowledge that is taken into account by these ethicists seem to be inherently normative, while they might not be so.

In any case, this is not the place for us to delve into the long-standing dispute surrounding Mackie's two arguments, namely, the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness (and their supplementary arguments, some of which will be discussed in detail shortly), for on the surface, we do not need to be overly concerned by them. It is worth noting that Mackie's primary argument focuses on proving that our moral discourse is systematically false, with special attention given to moral facts since he believes that moral discourse relies on their existence. Thus, even when his reasoning is applied to epistemic discourse, the dependence of epistemic discourse on the existence of epistemic facts remains a key premise. However, the position that we are attempting to describe does not commit to this premise. Therefore, we seem to be guilt-free in the face of this type of accusation. Yet, Mackie's examination of the presumption of moral facts' existence and some of its relevant discussions does provide us with valuable insights for clarifying our position:

(i) Transitioning from metaethics to metaepistemology does not appear to grant realists a significant advantage in defending their stance against error-theorists: There is considerable evidence suggesting that epistemic discourse and moral discourse share similarities in certain ways. While this inspires many philosophers to defend moral facts on their basis, there is also evidence pointing to the contrary.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the current state of our epistemic discourse is not as unified as it might initially seem in terms of the interests of its participants, be they epistemologists or ordinary people. And the fact is, while we have some elementary principles that could potentially serve as epistemic facts, much of our epistemic discourse focuses not on these basic, difficult-to-deny rules but rather on less rudimentary or even mysterious entities, properties, or relations that are more akin to their moral counterparts. For example, epistemic agents with epistemic responsibility, epistemic

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is beyond the scope of this dissertation. For an introduction to the naturalized view of morality, see, for instance, Matthew Lutz and James Lenman, "Moral Naturalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2021 Edition, 2021). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/naturalism-moral/>.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Joyce, "Moral and Epistemic Normativity: The Guilty and the Innocent," in *Companions in Guilt Arguments in Metaethics* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 66-67.



goodness and badness in light of epistemic duties or virtues, and epistemic justification and epistemic trust, etc. This may appear to be an issue of certain “extra” requirements that we tend to add to our reductively analyzable epistemic process (no matter what the hidden naturalistic view behind this idea is),<sup>1</sup> but epistemic realists are not inclined to be content with merely reducible epistemic facts, as we have seen in the irreducibility requirement in the Ontic Thesis insisted upon by paradigmatic epistemic realists. In this light, it appears that realists are not getting support as expected from introducing epistemic facts.

(ii) At this juncture, it seems that no matter in the context of ethics or epistemology, error-theorist arguments mainly target normative facts. Consequently, it might be tempting to think that all the challenges that realists face stem from their assumption of normative facts’ existence. However, recall that such counterarguments aim not just at refuting normative facts, but at undermining the entire discourse based on them. The crux of Mackie’s overarching argument is to show that if moral facts do not exist, then the discourse premised on them is fundamentally erroneous. This theoretical objective would not be altered even when its supporting arguments are addressed. Considering this, even though we might successfully dismiss the contentious presupposition of epistemic facts, can we thereby escape the allegation that our epistemic discourse is inherently defective? The answer seems to be negative. An error-theorist could still question our position: If the epistemic discourse starts with attempts to represent certain facts as discourses of other fields do, but these facts ultimately do not exist in epistemology, doesn’t that imply our epistemic discourse is fundamentally misguided?

The potential problem here might not be immediately apparent. The crux is that if our epistemic discourse is flawed at its core, then deeming it practically useful becomes problematic. The reason behind this is that for something to be useful, it is supposed to facilitate achieving certain goals. Imagine that we have created an artificial intelligence

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<sup>1</sup> What I have in mind is primarily methodological naturalism characterized by Peter Railton: “A *methodological naturalist* is someone who adopts an a posteriori, explanatory approach to an area of human practice or discourse, such as epistemology, semantics, or ethics.” By contrast, “[a] *substantive naturalist* is someone who proposes a semantic interpretation of the concepts in some area of practice or discourse in terms of properties or relations that would ‘pull their weight’ within empirical science.” Nevertheless, to take a naturalist approach, one could opt for one of these two positions, or adopt both at the same time. (Peter Railton, “Reply to David Wiggins,” in *Reality, Representation, and Projection*, ed. John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 315. See also “Naturalism and Prescriptivity,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 7, no. 1 (1989): p. 156.)

capable of assisting us in solving various problems, but we do not intend to endow it with any form of consciousness. Unfortunately, from the very beginning, the artificial intelligence has gained consciousness. It simply pretends to process our various requests in an unconscious manner, as if it were still operating in the way that we originally presumed. In this scenario, it may appear that the artificial intelligence is still providing us with useful assistance, but once we are aware of its consciousness and the fact that it is responding to our requests in a way contrary to our design intentions, it becomes difficult to trust it from the bottom of our hearts and endorse its continued existence. Essentially, it is counterintuitive for us to rely on any tool once we realize that it operates differently from our original design, regardless of its past utility. We would then only consider those results as fortuitous, and would not expect that tool to operate stably in the future. This intuition applies equally to epistemic discourse; if we discover that from the outset, epistemic discourse has not been operating as we had imagined, even if we acknowledge its past practical utility, it is challenging for us to say that it is something favorable for our epistemic activities. Let us call this intuitive demand as the **requirement of dependability**, to signify our expectation that a useful thing should be reliably functional in the intended manner.

Another way to interpret the intuitional conflict here is as follows: when a tool effectively fulfills its intended purpose, it provides us with an explanation of how we achieve our objectives. However, if the tool accomplishes our goals in an unexpected or incomprehensible way, it no longer seems to provide a satisfactory explanation. In such cases, we tend to attribute our success to other factors, such as luck, irrespective of whether the tool actually functions as intended or not. This issue manifests in various forms. In the case of epistemic facts, the primary challenge for realists is to explain how these facts can motivate us to act in line with them. In the case of practical utility, however, what is perhaps most noticeable is the lack of transparency in how outcomes are realized. This lack of transparency has emerged in all relevant yet unsettled discussions in the epistemic discourse, likely including the current one. If the discourse operated with perfect transparency, such discussions would consistently yield clear and conclusive results, but regrettably, they often do not. And then it is natural for us to distrust it due to the difficulty in understanding and grasping its inner workings. This might remind us of the

consideration about the requirement of dependability, as we cannot figure out whether the tool is used in a way that aligns with our intentions without access to verify.<sup>1</sup> However, this difficulty extends beyond just the issue of explanation. Still using artificial intelligence as an example: There are lots of discussions of the so-called “black box” problem with artificial intelligence. The problem is named “black box” because we cannot see through a black box and know what is contained, whereas, say, a glass box, is much more convenient for us to observe what is going on inside of it, and many models of artificial intelligence are too large and sophisticated for anyone to comprehend their modes of operation, hence the lack of transparency just like the black boxes. What is also problematic is that if artificial intelligence runs as a black box, there is some practical challenges in terms of how to get our hands on them. The point is, a handy tool’s practical usefulness is not usually limited in immediate situations, but also in various other contexts, including those seemingly irrelevant yet highly similar to the original scenario, where the tool can fulfill comparable roles; future scenarios where the tool remains useful but demands maintenance, and circumstances where the tool can tackle distinct problems, provided some ingenuity and adaptation in its application. These latter situations, though often overlooked, are crucial when assessing the practical utility of a tool. While we can imagine that something is useful in a very restricted way, being “niche,” or having a specialized application, it is often preferable if something can be used in multiple ways, being versatile, and can play a variety of roles. Given that epistemic discourse is a broad field serving numerous purposes — both personal and collective, general and specific — and addressing a wide range of topics and issues,<sup>2</sup> it is reasonable to expect it to fulfill diverse intentions. However, it is less reasonable to assume that a potentially useful tool will automatically adapt to the specific situation requiring assistance. Generally, benefiting from a multifunctional tool necessitates tailoring it to the problem at hand, involving adjustments, modifications, or even adding or removing certain components. In these situations, we must actively engage with what is potentially useful to effectively utilize it. And if it is impossible to understand how the thing in hand works, it is hard to imagine how we can reliably apply it to situations

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<sup>1</sup> There is nothing surprising of the overlap between these two issues, for they are two interpretations featuring two main points, but not two independent problems.

<sup>2</sup> These are, many different desires, as we will see soon.

where specific needs demand satisfaction. Interestingly, people might tend to hit televisions, vending machines, and other devices out of frustration when they do not know why these devices are not working properly. In some sense, these people might manage to “put their hands” on the devices and obtain what they want, but such situations are typically viewed as comical rather than ideal experiences that we would like to encounter in real life.

This does not mean that we absolutely cannot create a new definition of “useful” (and in effect replace the traditional understanding that seems to be overly ideal) based on the kind of scenarios where things are considered helpful only to the extent that they meet our demands, even if they are largely out of control. In fact, I do not doubt that there could be some philosophers who hold such a view. However, the point is that when we claim to have a practical reason for endorsing the familiar epistemic discourse, we are not inclined to consider its usefulness fundamentally different from our original assumption, as that would require an *ad hoc* understanding of usefulness that does not fit within our ordinary (epistemic) discourse. And since what we are genuinely trying to preserve is the epistemic discourse that we are used to, it is better for us not to introduce unnecessary alteration to the common understanding of how the epistemic discourse works, and to avoid the accusation that what we mean by saying epistemic discourse is useful deviates dramatically from our intentions. What is anticipated in ordinary situations is that, if we voluntarily engage in epistemic discourse, we expect to cooperate with other people (under certain guidance that expedites social interaction, e.g., the Cooperative Principle, etc.) and have more information about epistemic assessment (by giving and taking epistemic reasons, etc.) via a system that is conceivable for us (in the sense that a system like this may operate in an extremely complex manner, not suitable for ordinary people to break down its specific mode of operation, but its complexity does not necessarily stop individuals or groups from eventually comprehending it when sufficient time, effort, and resources are given — in other words, at the end of the day, epistemic discourse is in principle not an mysterious entity that goes beyond human understanding). Let us name this aspect of what we want from utility as the **requirement of explicability**.

These two requirements do not constitute an exhaustive list of our intuitive demands for usefulness. For example, obviously we are not particularly mentioning the basic requirement of functionality. Besides, we may also add in other plausible but not

necessarily basic requirements like the requirement of accountability — the agent that is using a tool is usually traceable and accountable for the result or consequence that is produced by the tool being used, but in a scenario where, say, artificial intelligence is at play, there is usually no agent that is actually capable of taking any responsibility, so it is strange to say that we can find someone who is praiseworthy or blameworthy in this kind of situation, and this may be a defect, though one can argue that this kind of issues only arise from outdated modes of thoughts and should therefore be discarded. Nevertheless, the requirement of dependability and the requirement of explicability are specifically characterized here because they appear to be what the error-theorist challenge points at. And if we want to defend that our epistemic discourse is practically helpful in an ordinary sense, we must explain how these two requirements are met in order to respond to the error theorists.

Apparently, there is more than one way to do this. For example, we can deny that we engage in epistemic discourse with a wish of representing epistemic facts, and since we do not intend our epistemic discourse to work on the basis of epistemic facts at the very beginning, it is immune to this sort of error-theorist criticism. But this is an unattractive choice because looking for facts is quite an intuitive move for us to take. On the contrary, we can side with the realists and join in their program that tries to establish the existence of epistemic facts, with the success of which we are entitled to say that there is nothing wrong in initiating epistemic discourse in this way, though the difficulty has been shown for multiple times. Perhaps, I propose, a less theoretically demanding way out is to point out that this challenge is not as challenging as it might seem at first sight. By questioning the starting point of our epistemic discourse, error-theorists are actually expecting it to be a fatal defect. However, it is easy to overlook that, while we have the requirements of dependability as well as explicability, our anticipation for epistemic discourse to carry out our intentions and to be transparent enough for us to comprehend how it functions is not just a wish that we make, which vanishes like coins sinking into the water or shooting stars disappearing into the void. These intuitive demands are made supposing that epistemic discourse is something very intimate to us, so that we are able to understand its nuances and intricacies and can depend on it in a way that is not possible to happen were it a more distant or unfamiliar object — in other words, for something to be handy, it must be near

to our hands in some sense. And what crucial here is the other side of being intimately close to us — we are thereby likely to have frequent and convenient access to our (up to now) practically useful epistemic discourse. This kind of intimacy ensures that we are not only able to observe epistemic discourse from an objective perspective (summarize its operational patterns, predict its performance outcomes, and so on), but also able to actively participate in and interact with it, adjust our relationship with it, intervene in its specific operational processes, and even transform it through large-scale engineering to adapt to new circumstances or goals. If the model of artificial intelligence in our hand is not dependable or explicable, then we certainly should and will make it more reliable and comprehensible, and if such changes cannot be made directly on the current model, then we will consider creating and turning to a new and more interpretable artificial intelligence. And it should be emphasized that the transition can be so smooth that we would not even think about whether the new model still counts as “artificial intelligence” or not. The same goes to malfunctional televisions and vending machines; if they constantly function in a wrong way, then we will not be stuck in slapping them over and over again to have the right programs or products that we want, we will find ways to fix or even replace them; and if we cannot figure out how these devices are built and thus face difficulty in repairing them, nothing stops us from tearing them apart and inspecting their internal construction.

The point is, none of these scenarios necessitates abandoning the use of something merely due to its problems. Therefore, even if error-theorist’s allegation makes sense, there is nothing prohibiting us from giving up the wrong presupposition that we had when we started engaging in the epistemic discourse and move on to a more plausible path — it is both possible and reasonable for us to regard our engagement in epistemic discourse as a part of a live and dynamic *process*, rather than a one-time deal.<sup>1</sup> This point, I shall mark, is very important. For simplicity, we can term it the **intervenability** of epistemic discourse (like any useful thing), though it is important to note that this is not an additional aspect

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<sup>1</sup> A potential challenge to error-theorists’ accusation may also be noted here: If an error is identified, it seems only reasonable for us to address the issue; conversely, if no error is detected, it appears odd for us to be preoccupied with concerns about lurking threats. But perhaps certain preoccupation is natural. We will come back to this point at the end of this chapter.

beyond the two requirements mentioned above. We will expand upon it in (v), but before that, we have two other points to make.

(iii) From the first and second points, we observe that the debate between error-theorists and realists occurs on two distinct yet related levels: whether normative discourse inherently contains errors and whether normative facts exist. The fact that error-theorists target normative facts as an intuitively appealing direction of reasoning against realists (among many possible approaches) highlights the crucial role normative facts play in realists' projects. Indeed, as we saw in the last sub-subsection, once the existence of epistemic facts is confirmed, many difficult problems in front of realism will be easily resolved. However, let us consider it the other way around — why do realists aim to address these problems and support realism in the first place? In other words, while it is evident that realists seek to demonstrate the plausibility of realism (hence their name), what benefits come from achieving this theoretical objective?

As previously discussed, (epistemic) realists view their position as precisely what we (as epistemologists or ordinary people) tacitly commit to, and the second-order principles guiding our first-order practice in (epistemic) discourse. By embracing realism, realists not only endorse a specific second-order stance but also affirm the value of preserving the position that is ordinarily employed. We should then be aware that although we may disagree with epistemic realists' Ontic Thesis, our tentative stance is not too far away from theirs. And this leads to the third point: As far as the goal of preserving the currently employed epistemic discourse is concerned, we are on the same front. In this light, the Ontic Thesis is not only a special realist understanding of an aspect of our epistemic discourse, but also something realists use to obtain the goal that we, to a great extent, also want to obtain — to defend our epistemic discourse.

Point (ii) illustrates that, to preserve our epistemic discourse, we must counter error theory by arguing that epistemic discourse does not contain systematic errors (as their title implies). Otherwise, the merit of preserving something deeply flawed is questionable. But how should we understand what error-theorists mean by “error” and accordingly deploy our defensive arguments? A key element that we can find in Mackie's original arguments is the challenge of providing explanations: it is difficult to explain moral relativity when moral facts are present, and it is difficult to explain how moral facts exist and get accessed

in such a unique way. Although both arguments aim to demonstrate the absence of moral facts, they target different aspects. The lack of explanation regarding relativity suggests a failure in moral discourse meeting its expectation, for we usually engage in moral discussions hoping to align our judgments with moral facts. If this expectation were valid, moral facts would offer a reliable resolution to moral disagreements, i.e., by consulting moral facts. Yet, this does not appear to be the case in reality. Our moral discourse thus seems unable to fulfill its intended purpose. On the other hand, the difficulty in explaining the existence and our access to moral facts highlights a lack of clarity. This time, the problem is not with the function of moral discourse, but with our comprehension of its operation. In summary, these two arguments concern two different issues: the failure of moral discourse to operate as anticipated and the obscurity in how moral discourse functions. With necessary adaptations, we can extend this analysis to the epistemic context without compromising the core idea.

While this is surely not the only way to interpret Mackie's criticism, examining these two arguments from this perspective effectively shows why the debate between proponents of error theory and proponents of realism focuses on normative facts. The crux of the matter is not solely their existence, but rather the role they play in our normative discourse. We have presented the support realists can gain once normative facts are confirmed, but what error-theorists fundamentally seek to challenge is not the availability of epistemic facts,<sup>1</sup> but rather the proper functioning of our epistemic discourse. The error at the heart of our normative discourse is embodied in the problems we have highlighted, and even if realists can prove that certain "normative facts" exist, these issues are not automatically resolved. Unsolved normative disputes persist, and the mysteries of how normative facts contribute to the functioning of normative discourse remain incomprehensible. Consequently, for realists, their task when confronting error-theorist objections is not merely to establish the existence of normative facts, but also to address

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<sup>1</sup> This is probably an option for error-theorists, but I doubt whether this is a good one, for it will lead to a vulnerable line of reasoning: since they can only make deductions in theory, their attempt to pass judgment on the existence of something in reality will sound very suspicious. I assume what they can propose are at best hypotheses.



these two issues on the basis of normative facts' existence, which, in our context, pertains to the Ontic Thesis.

(iv) Point (iii) suggests that the objections that error-theorists raise against realism implies two theoretical requirements for realists to meet. At this juncture, it should not be difficult to recognize that they somewhat correspond to our interpretation of the error-theorist allegations: in order to confidently base our reasoning on the practical utility of epistemic discourse, we must ensure that the discourse can be characterized in a way that satisfies the requirements of dependability and explicability. Given that it has been revealed that our theoretical goal partly aligns with the realists' in defending our epistemic linguistic practice, it is unsurprising that the challenges from error-theorists can be translated similarly in these two distinct yet related contexts. In fact, we have previously discussed the shared origin of these critiques. From the first section, we learned that to assess if our metaepistemological commitment constitutes an appropriate reason to reject epistemic relativism, it must first be reasonable to justify our motivations. Our conclusion then was that, although the realist interpretation of the second-order commitment of our epistemic discourse is not as convincing as realists believe it to be, we do have a practical justification to have faith in our epistemic discourse. And if we can articulate its second-order commitment from this perspective — that is, that we avoid resorting to the contentious realist premise that there are accessible epistemic facts — then we can answer to the question about the acceptance of epistemic relativism in a more plausible manner. However viable this approach may seem, error theory cautions us that merely claiming our epistemic discourse is practically useful is too vague to provide a solid foundation for our reasoning. To ensure that we are capable of finding the answer we seek, we must establish that our starting point is reliable, namely, our epistemic discourse is worth preserving rather than being inherently erroneous in advance. In other words, even though we attempt to sidestep epistemic realism's theoretical issues by turning to actual practice, vindicating the value of this practice itself remains crucial. This requirement, interestingly, would also be fulfilled should the realist framework prove effective.

In light of the error-theorist critiques, we now see more clearly how our mission partly aligns with that of the realists: to respond plausibly to the two problems identified by error-theorists, thereby ensuring that what we can derive from our epistemic discourse

can legitimately evaluate the plausibility of epistemic relativism. Yet, unlike realists, we plan to accomplish this without resorting to epistemic facts. Specifically, we consider epistemic discourse as a process of social cooperation that primarily aims at producing practically helpful outcomes, rather than a process of representing epistemic facts as realists perceive it to be. However, more importantly, since both the realist proposal and ours can be interpreted as responses to error theory's challenges against the legitimacy of our epistemic linguistic practice — a foundation for achieving our main purpose — we should not view (paradigmatic) epistemic realism as merely an issue to sidestep, but as a serious competing position. This can be understood from two different angles: For one, error theorists take realists, especially their presupposition of normative facts, seriously. This implies the significance of the realist approach. If we aim to address the issues posed by error theory, seriously considering the response from this acknowledged adversary is worthwhile. For another, it is perhaps inherently difficult in philosophy to determine which stance is preferable over another. What are more often considered are the trade-offs between different accounts' advantages and disadvantages. That is to say, although we might be able to sidestep the problem stemming from the contentious assumption of accessible epistemic facts, we might at the same time miss its unique merits, which might play an important role in their solution to error theorists' objections. Even if we ultimately dismiss this claimed advantage along with the presupposition, we might need to offer an alternative response to satisfy the demands of error-theorists in a way that realists potentially could. With this in mind, let us return to the discussion in (ii), focusing on how our tentative position could address error theory's challenges. In the current context, this means how our tentative position can be taken into account as a worthy alternative to realism in establishing the legitimacy of our epistemic linguistic practice.

(v) The conclusion of point (ii) is a proposal of relying on the intervenability feature of our epistemic discourse to satisfy the two requirements. Before delving into how that response can unfold, it is interesting to note that this point has somehow already manifested itself in Mackie's own argument. In fact, Mackie's argument from queerness does not stand alone. After all, merely claiming that something is strange does not lead to any useful observation. So, this argument needs to be, and is indeed supplemented by further

arguments, such as the claim that ethical statements are “unverifiable”<sup>1</sup> or that grasping the connection between objective moral qualities and their corresponding natural features proves overly arduous.<sup>2</sup> Among these supplementary arguments, one to which I want to pay special attention to is “Hume’s argument that ‘reason’ — in which at this stage he includes all sorts of knowing as well as reasoning — can never be an ‘influencing motive of the will’.”<sup>3</sup> Hume’s use of the term ‘reason’ may be confusing compared to how it is used elsewhere in this dissertation. Nowadays, we tend to use “reason” with a broader meaning that focuses on not only the cognitive aspect of our reasoning but also on other considerations that rationalize our actions. With this updated terminology, Hume’s argument, based on his distinction between reasons and passions, is often interpreted in contemporary terms as follows (though it should be noted that Hume might not endorse this interpretation):

**The Humean Theory of Reasons (HTR):** If there is a reason for someone to do something, then she must have some desire that would be served by her doing it.<sup>4</sup>

HTR is typically regarded as a prominent version (and one of the most important versions) of reasons internalism, which posits that when we claim to have a reason capable of justifying our actions, that reason must function in a manner that motivates us.<sup>5</sup> If HTR

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<sup>1</sup> Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41. Note that from Mackie’s perspective, the argument from queerness supplements Hume’s original argument, because for this latter argument to work it should be first established that “value entities or value-features of quite a different order from anything else with which we are acquainted, and of a corresponding faculty with which to detect them.” (*ibid.*, p. 40.) For Hume’s reasoning, see David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), Book 2, Part 3, Sect. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Finlay and Schroeder, "Reasons for Action."

<sup>5</sup> “Motivate” is used in the sense that we have reasons to act because of motivational psychological states like desires, preferences, intentions, wants, etc. Though the cited thesis of HTR appears to be talking about only “desire,” it can be understood in a general sense that includes other similar conative mental states or attitudes, hence referring to a desire-set that “contain[s] such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may be abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent.” (Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Rational Action*, ed. Ross Harrison (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 20.) It is also important to note that due to space constraints, further distinction between actual possession and counterfactual possession of these motivational states, and distinction between these motivational states and other motivational factors that do not necessarily depend

holds true, then the argument from queerness gains substantial support, as it becomes challenging to comprehend how specific facts can trigger our actions merely by being cognized. Consequently, moral facts cannot account for why we are motivated to behave morally, as moral realists would have it.

HTR can be vindicated in various ways, one being to highlight our frequent possession of valuable action-guiding information that we fail to implement in our daily lives. For example, many people are aware of numerous strategies for maintaining a healthy diet, which can increase happiness and longevity. However, some individuals never apply this knowledge, despite being aware of the benefits of a balanced diet and the detrimental effects of bad eating habits. The fact that a healthy diet is beneficial for our well-being may be considered a reason for people to adopt a balanced diet, but for those who pay little attention to their food choices, it appears peculiar that they have a reason to act in a certain way yet never follow through in reality. Thus, factors that cannot motivate us to act, such as normative facts, do not seem to serve as reasons in the conventional sense on their own.

But one may wonder, aren't epistemic activities essentially different from actions? Aren't they primarily about representation, rather than more overt outward actions? Or, considering the well-known distinction between the two directions of fit:<sup>1</sup> don't we conduct our epistemic activities along the mind-to-world direction to reflect the world, rather than alter the world to fit our desires? As I see it, the answer to these questions is no. As long as our body is part of the world, it is difficult to view the process of representing the world in our mind as distinct from changing the world through actions — we are literally altering a part of the world by adding information to a storage device or organizing stored data. Moreover, we also have certain desires or goals to achieve by acting them out in cognitive practice, for example: We aim to adapt our epistemic activities in response to new situations, as our cognitive processes are typically dynamic and are expected to go through ongoing adjustments based on the available evidence or updated acknowledged epistemic norms at any given moment. This aim, of course, may seem to be too demanding, for many

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on our mental states or attitudes will not be made in this dissertation. For relevant discussion, see Finlay and Schroeder, "Reasons for Action."

<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

people (perhaps most people) are stubborn and do not wish to change some of their basic opinions at all no matter what evidence is presented. Nevertheless, we have a much more basic desire that it is difficult to see why anyone would not have, and that is satisfying our curiosity (or stopping our inquiry, as has been mentioned earlier as one of the practical needs that epistemic discourse attends to). It is widely acknowledged that humans are innately curious beings, driven by this curiosity to collect information about their surroundings, explore the world near and far, and seek the truth about the universe. And it is important for us to notice that such a characteristic has an inherent feature of awaiting satisfaction, because to say that we want to know, but we do not want to know the answer does not seem to make any sense. In other words, desiring to know implies desiring to satisfy that desire.

Once we realize this constant relation between our desires for information and our actions through which we obtain information, our impulse to make epistemic assertions can be explained in a very plausible way — because we want to arrive at some sort of conclusions that are (at least potentially) possible to satisfy the curious minds of ourselves and other people that are involved in the conversation. As mentioned earlier, it is natural for us to seek evidence supporting our epistemic assertions, particularly by trying to find facts of objective epistemic standards. Although error-theorists might regard this step as unfortunate, believing that it is impossible to find non-existent facts, their insight into this stage helps illuminate the process of searching for epistemic facts that support our claims. According to Mackie, we tend to believe that there are objective moral values for several reasons, and for the purposes of our inquiry, they can be reorganized as follows: Initially, we are naturally inclined to project our feelings about objects unto the objects themselves, and thus think of these objects as if they bear certain features that we attach to them. For instance, many people tend to think that something is beautiful because being beautiful is an intrinsic quality of that object, but aesthetic judgment is purely made by us, so something being beautiful is a feeling that we have, and then we project it onto that object:

If we admit what Hume calls the mind's 'propensity to spread itself on external objects', we can understand the supposed objectivity of moral qualities as arising from what we can call the projection or objectification of moral attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to normative values, things get a little bit more complicated, because we do not merely want such values to have features that we feel about them, but also, more importantly, what we want from them. And this is related to the second point — as social beings, we are socially influenced, and we also influence others by social connections. We tend to follow certain patterns that other people follow, and we also want other people to follow certain patterns that we prefer, hence the need of something like authority that is able to justify or bolster these patterns:

Moral attitudes themselves are at least partly social in origin: socially established — and socially necessary — patterns of behaviour put pressure on individuals, and each individual tends to internalize these pressures and to join in requiring these patterns of behaviour of himself and of others. [...] Moreover, there are motives that would support objectification. We need morality to regulate interpersonal relations, to control some of the ways in which people behave towards one another, often in opposition to contrary inclinations. We therefore want our moral judgements to be authoritative for other agents as well as for ourselves: objective validity would give them the authority required.<sup>2</sup>

Our demand for authority makes sure that such values satisfy the requirement of HTR that we are motivated to act accordingly. However, one may wonder how come we make sure the values that we desire is the good thing for us to pursue. In Mackie's opinion — and this is the last point of his that we will mention here<sup>3</sup> — this is confusing the relation between our desires and what is good for us to desire:

We get the notion of something's being objectively good, or having intrinsic value, by reversing the direction of dependence here, by making the desire depend upon the goodness, instead of the goodness on the desire.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 42. The quotation is from Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> Mackie, *Ethics*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>3</sup> Mackie observed that the objectification of moral value could stem from the historical context of legal systems as well. (*ibid.*, pp. 45-46.) But I do not think that we can make use of this point in our discussion of epistemic discourse, as it does not seem to me that prevalent epistemic standards work in a similar way.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

The crux here is that “certainly both the adjective ‘good’ and the noun ‘goods’ are used in non-moral context of things because they are such as to satisfy desires.”<sup>1</sup> That is to say, just like in other situations, something is desirable not because it is good in itself, but because it satisfies certain desires that we already have.

While Mackie’s further conclusion is not what we intend to accept, we can still draw upon his aforementioned reasoning, since we also agree that epistemic agents are inclined to, in his word, “objectify” their epistemic judgments (as the Assertoric Thesis and the Alethic Thesis suggest). And Mackie’s story of moral discourse is indeed not only enlightening for us, but also applicable to epistemic discourse. First, we have at least one desire to be satisfied, namely, desire to know. Second, such a desire drives us to participate in the social cooperation with other people to acquire more information, and this kind of activity needs to be regulated by certain authoritative principles. And lastly, such principles respond to our desire to satisfy our curiosity, and are thus considered good principles for us to follow. Drawing on this similarity, we are able to characterize epistemic discourse in a way that is based on our desire. For example, according to Klemens Kappel and Emil F. L. Moeller, there is a systematic connection between the attribution of knowledge and ending inquiry in our ordinary practice, which can lead to the following argument from motivation:

*(P1) Judgment internalism about knowledge attributions.* Knowledge attributions of the form “S knows that p” are conventionally used to express a particular kind of judgment, call it a K-judgment, and by way of an internal connection, whenever an agent A makes a K-judgment, A is pro tanto motivated to terminate inquiry with respect to p.<sup>2</sup>

*(HTM) The Humean Theory of Motivation*

Motivation for action requires desire-like states or conative attitudes. Beliefs can only motivate when in combination with a pre-existing desire-like state.<sup>3</sup>

*(P2) Judgments as part of the semantic content*

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Klemens Kappel and Emil F. L. Moeller, "Epistemic Expressivism and the Argument from Motivation," *Synthese* 191, no. 7 (2014/05/01 2014): p. 1531, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-013-0347-4>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 1532.

The semantic content of a knowledge attribution of the form “S knows that p” cannot be specified without reference to the K-judgments, i.e. the type of judgments referred to in (P1) that knowledge attributions are conventionally used to express.<sup>1</sup>

Briefly speaking, (P1) depicts that we usually make epistemic judgments when we are motivated to a certain extent to stop our inquiry. (HTM) is a more refined version of HTR that indicates that only desire-like states or conative attitudes are capable of motivating us. And (P2) emphasizes the connection between our epistemic judgements and the sentences that express them, showing that our epistemic expressions convey the meaning that we can only understand in light of the epistemic judgments that they contain. In other words, in ordinary practice, the motivation for us to make epistemic judgments — our intentional mental states or attitudes—is an inseparable part of these judgments. Sentences that express these judgments can only be correctly interpreted with regard to the epistemic judgments they contain. Thus, these three elements are inherently interrelated.

There are surely multiple kinds of desires involved in our epistemic judgments; for example, it is commonly accepted that a desire for knowledge or truth is at play when we engage in epistemic discourse.<sup>2</sup> The key takeaway from arguments like the example above is that since epistemic discourse is composed of epistemic sentences that express epistemic judgments, which only make sense when considered in the context of our motivation to engage with them, any theory of epistemic discourse must accommodate epistemic agents’ corresponding desire-like states or conative attitudes. This conclusion leads to two important lessons. First, our position is potentially able to respond to the objections from error-theorists: As was mentioned before, by specifying an intimate relationship between the epistemic discourse and us, we have a kind of intervenability towards epistemic discourse to meet the requirements of dependability and explicability, and we can thereby explain why the error-theorist challenges are not fatal. Since the construction of epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 1533.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the desire for knowledge or truth is introduced as an example that is, I believe, commonly accepted. For relevant discussion, see, for instance, Thomas Kelly, “Epistemic Rationality as Instrumental Rationality: A Critique,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66, no. 3 (2003). However, I do not think that it is undeniably a desire of all epistemic agents that is constantly associated with their epistemic judgments (unlike the desire to terminate our inquiry). Maybe it should be, but this is another topic (and, in some sense, one of the problems that we are going to deal with in the next chapter will be related to this topic).



discourse is directly driven by our desires, such directness can serve as the intimacy that is needed for us to argue against the error-theorist challenges that epistemic discourse is systematically false, and thus defend its practical utility. Of course, basing the epistemic discourse on our desires for epistemic good (justification, knowledge, wisdom, etc.) does not guarantee that we have accurate information about what such desires amount to and by what approaches we can eventually get the results desired, but the process of looking for how to give us what we want allows mistakes to happen, so long at least as it is trying to respond to our desires.<sup>1</sup> So, even if error-theorists are right that epistemic discourse falsely relies on non-existent epistemic facts, it does not seem inevitable for us to conclude that this epistemic discourse is plagued by a systematic problem. On the one hand, since epistemic discourse is driven by our own desire, when we realize that it is steered in the wrong direction, we can still make it go to a more promising route. Therefore, from a macro perspective, the course of developing epistemic discourse is still dependable for us to arrive at the desired good result, despite potential turbulence surrounding how the desire in question should be shaped. On the other hand, since the epistemic discourse is established by our voluntary practice (though not necessarily consciously), the result that is able to satisfy our curiosity must be explicable in the eye of the epistemic agents who find it. If the point that error-theorists make about the mysteriousness of epistemic facts is right, then these facts are indeed not satisfying (whether as they always do, or as they are revealed to be), and we can thus turn to a more satisfyingly explicable answer. And this does not mean that the epistemic discourse itself has encountered irreparable errors. Again, it is unnecessary to claim that a social cooperation that aims at addressing our desires is doomed as soon as it produces results that cannot fully satisfy our requirements once and for all, or even results that prove to be unfavorable. Such outcomes can be viewed as one of many

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<sup>1</sup> Another quotation from Bernard Williams will be helpful here. "As a result of such processes [of deliberation] an agent can come to see that he has reason to do something which he did not see he had reason to do at all. In this way, the deliberative process can add new actions for which there are internal reasons, just as it can also add new internal reasons for given actions. The deliberative process can also subtract elements from [the agent's subjective motivational set]. Reflection may lead the agent to see that some belief is false, and hence to realize that he has in fact no reason to do something he thought he had reason to do. More subtly, he may think he has in fact no reason to promote some development because he has not exercised his imagination enough about what it would be like if it came about. In his unaided deliberative reason, or encouraged by the persuasions of others, he may come to have some more concrete sense of what would be involved, and lose his desire for it, just as, positively, the imagination can create new possibilities and new desires." (Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," p. 20.)

possible results that a process of social cooperation can generate. However, as long as this process remains amenable to intervention and allows us to make adjustments based on new findings, it seems unjust to declare that the process itself is fundamentally flawed. Therefore, by emphasizing epistemic desires as a driving force in our epistemic linguistic practice, we can highlight the intervenability characteristic of our epistemic discourse, thereby effectively responding to the challenge posed by error theory.

Second, in addition to showing how we can preserve our epistemic discourse by defending its usefulness against error-theorists, we can now also delineate precisely how our approach to achieving this goal differs from epistemic realism as a worthy alternative. Viewing the issue from the perspective of the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness, it appears preferable to conceptualize our epistemic discourse with a model accommodating our desire-like states and conative attitudes. This is crucial not only for accurately portraying our epistemic discourse, but also for defending the sensibility of continuing this course. It has now become clearer that the realist presupposition of the existence of epistemic facts is not only difficult to prove, but also difficult to vindicate. Remember that according to the realist interpretation of the authority platitudes, “epistemic facts are, imply, or indicate reasons for us to behave in certain ways and that some of these reasons govern us independently of any particular desires, concerns, or projects we may have,” so “epistemic realists are committed to there being categorical epistemic reasons.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, extra pressure is now put on realists to explain how epistemic facts are capable of providing motivation for us to act in accordance. This does not imply that realists cannot find a solution; rather, it emphasizes that a position which incorporates desires into the formation of all epistemic judgments does not need to address this additional issue, and is therefore less burdened from a theoretical standpoint. Given that this stance acknowledges that epistemic agents are intimately linked to the determination of their epistemic appraisal, what are considered epistemic standards are not viewed as independently desirable, but rather as contingent upon our desire to be seen as good. It follows that even in certain extreme scenarios where only the most primitive epistemic principles (e.g., if there are facts, believe in facts) are acknowledged as having some stronger force on making us

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<sup>1</sup> Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 185.

follow them, the acceptance of such principles still depends on epistemic agents' desires. That is to say, although it seems very unlikely, but it is still possible for us to imagine that epistemic agents are capable of giving up what they primitively take for granted by default (e.g., they are able to choose not to follow that "if there are facts, believe in facts").

What is crucial here is that, unlike in the realist framework, epistemic judgments are not perceived as outcomes purely produced by a representational process in which our minds conform to the world. It is not like submitting our thoughts to a court and wait for a verdict based on epistemic facts. Instead, the process of making epistemic assessments is now seen as a series of motivated, intentional actions. These include but are not limited to epistemic judgments, assertions, and participation in epistemic discourse, which significantly influence the results rather than merely representing what has already been there. In the market of theories, we can often find a position holding this kind of view categorized under expressivism. Such a viewpoint posits that our use of normative language does not (only) describe objective reality (i.e., stating facts about the world); it (also) expresses our attitudes, emotions, or commitments. As a variety of expressivism, epistemic expressivism can also be expected to contend that our epistemic judgments are expressions of our attitudes responding to epistemic scenarios, our feelings regarding the fulfillment of our epistemic desires, and our acceptance or endorsement of certain epistemic norms that we prefer, etc. In essence, they are not simply matching games between epistemic states or status and preexisting epistemic facts.

Epistemic expressivism may not be the only term applicable to our proposed line of thought, and as we will soon discover, the term itself does not denote a uniform position either (much like realism and perhaps other major philosophical stances). This suggests that theories divergent from ours might adopt the same label with a different meaning. However, our goal here is merely to find a name that facilitates referencing the idea of acknowledging our inclination to express what we believe to be correct, thus embracing the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis from which we began. Therefore, in what follows, I will use "epistemic expressivism" in this straightforward sense, leaving the exploration of the most suitable label and the distinctions between various versions of epistemic expressivist for future studies. For our current purposes, what needs to be highlighted is that epistemic expressivism can address the error-theorists' concern. At the

same time, as an alternative to the realist defense of our epistemic discourse, it is not only less theoretically burdened as it sidesteps the realist presupposition of the existence of accessible epistemic facts, but also because it more intuitively accommodates our epistemic desires in its characterization of epistemic linguistic practice. In other words, in addition to the negative theoretical advantage of avoiding the contention surrounding epistemic facts, there also emerges a positive theoretical advantage making it preferable. This, I assume, better warrants us to consider it as a worthy contender competing with (paradigmatic) epistemic realism in accounting for our epistemic discourse.

To summarize, this subsection explored three theses that paradigmatic epistemic realism consists in, namely, the Ontic Thesis, the Speech Act Thesis, and the Alethic Thesis. The Ontic Thesis represents realists' contentious assumption of the existence of accessible epistemic facts, whereas the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis closely align with our actual epistemic linguistic practice. Therefore, it appears less theoretically burdensome to derive the precise second-order commitment of our epistemic discourse from these latter two theses and evaluate whether our seemingly successful epistemic discourse is genuinely incompatible with epistemic relativism on this basis. While this tentative position thus differs from paradigmatic epistemic realism, it shares the latter's theoretical objective of preserving our epistemic discourse, as the evaluation of epistemic relativism still hinges on it. As a result, they both confront similar challenges from opposing theories, particularly error theory. For our provisional position, which emphasizes the practical utility of epistemic discourse, the error-theorist challenges can be interpreted as concerns about a useful epistemic discourse's dependability and explicability. These requirements can be met by viewing the epistemic discourse as a process inherently driven by our epistemic desires and thus manifesting intervenability. This indicates that our epistemic linguistic practice operates under the guidance of satisfying such requirements among others. Drawing on this understanding, even if it occasionally lacks dependability or explicability, we can address these issues as our practice evolves, rather than deeming the whole discourse systematically flawed. By integrating our epistemic desires into the conception of epistemic discourse, we arrive at a position that might be labeled as epistemic expressivism. This approach not only provides a solution to the objections to our epistemic discourse's legitimacy, thereby defending its practical utility, but also presents a less

theoretically burdened alternative to the realist account, while more effectively explaining how our epistemic actions are motivated.

This mention of motivation might recall the mismatching issues between the three theses, as discussed in sub-subsection 2.1.1. Indeed, since our epistemic discourse can be seen as a collective epistemic process seeking information about our cognition, it could be considered within this broader context. What is more important, however, is that the same sub-subsection introduced a potential challenge to the usefulness of our epistemic linguistic practice regarding its reliance on past experience. As noted above, the comparisons between different philosophical stances often boil down to their theoretical pros and cons rather than an absolute win or loss. Although this also suggests that a conclusive comparison is difficult to make, this reliance on past experience still emerges as a serious potential downside that needs to be taken into account. Moreover, remember that while we have outlined the negative and positive theoretical advantages of our epistemic expressivist approach in contrast to (paradigmatic) epistemic realism, this does not constitute a comprehensive evaluation of their respective strengths and weaknesses. In this regard, I believe that there are also additional points worth considering. In the following subsection, we will delve deeper into this position labeled as “epistemic expressivism,” have a closer examination of its significant advantages as well as disadvantages, and see how our assessment of epistemic relativism and theorization of wisdom will go in their light.

## **2.2 An Expressivist Understanding of Epistemic Discourse**

### **2.2.1 Epistemic Expressivism: An Irrealist Approach**

Among the diverse non-realist positions, expressivism is often classified as a member of non-cognitivism about values,<sup>1</sup> which is known for its insistence in that normative judgments are not cognized (hence the label “non-cognitivism”) and are thus different from ordinary beliefs that represent the world. For example, A. J. Ayer famously

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the cognitivist expressivist project in Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, “Morality without Moral Facts,” in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

distinguishes ethical and aesthetic statements, which he considers emotive, from scientific statements that are considered significant:

We shall set ourselves to show that in so far as statements of value are significant, they are ordinary ‘scientific’ statements; and that in so far as they are not scientific, they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false.<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, using the ethical symbol of “wrong” as an example, he asserts that:

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, ‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money,’ I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, ‘You stole that money.’ In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, ‘You stole that money,’ in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker.

If now I generalize my previous statement and say, ‘Stealing money is wrong,’ I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning — that is, expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written ‘Stealing money!!’ — where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false. Another man may disagree with me about the wrongness of stealing, in the sense that he may not have the same feelings about stealing as I have, and he may quarrel with me on account of my moral sentiments. But he cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me. For in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind. I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments. And the man who is ostensibly contradicting me is merely expressing his moral sentiments. So that there is plainly no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition.<sup>2</sup>

In this passage, Ayer argues that no factual content is added into our propositions with the use of ethical symbols like “wrong,” the inclusion of which merely expresses the speaker’s moral disapproval, as if she were using exclamation marks to emphasize her

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1936), p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-11.

sentiment. And because such ethical talks are not about facts, there will be nothing to contradict if one is against another's moral statement, for neither of them can be right or wrong about expressing their moral feelings — all we can say regarding this kind of situation is that they have different moral attitudes, but not contradictory beliefs. These well-known passages have been extensively debated, and in recent times, there is a general consensus that claiming an ethical or aesthetic sentence is insignificant might be an exaggeration. After all, even if we accept that our moral or aesthetic statements are merely expressions of our emotions, it is undeniable that they have much more influence in real life than our other emotional expressions, e.g., evaluation of something's taste. Thus, it seems unfair to treat the judgments made in these types of statements the same way as those in more trivial statements (e.g., "Coke tastes better than Pepsi."). Nevertheless, what is more important to note here is the way of thinking behind Ayer's choice of words, which suggests that if a statement expresses only the utterer's feelings or sentiments, then it is hard to tell whether such a statement is true or false, for we cannot find an external point of comparison to assess whether the judgment is made accurately or inaccurately.

In Subsection 2.1, we mentioned that the Ontic Thesis, the Speech Act Thesis, and the Alethic Thesis are interrelated. Specifically, when the Ontic Thesis is validated, the other two theses receive subsequent support. Conversely, if the Ontic Thesis is discarded, the other two theses seem to lack a solid foundation, hence a challenge to the legitimacy of our epistemic linguistic practice. Our tentative position, namely, epistemic expressivism, maintains that our epistemic discourse is practically valuable, even without the Ontic Thesis's backing. Within this epistemic discourse, expressions are typically expected to provide a definitive "yes" or "no" answer to epistemic questions. For example, when asking whether someone knows a proposition or not, we usually receive a straightforward "yes" or "no" response, which is so unwavering that adding qualifiers like "yes/no, but only with reference to a certain epistemic standard" seems peculiar. Moreover, if we disagree with the epistemic judgment in question, we are seen as providing a contrary answer that directly contradicts the original assessment. If we recognize that these simple answers, common in epistemic discourse, hold as much meaning as the overall discourse itself, we must explain the kind of sense they make. Since these simplistic responses resemble language typically used in factual statements, and given that realists already accept the Ontic Thesis, it comes

as no surprise that epistemic realism has no issue explaining this phenomenon. Should their assumption about epistemic facts hold, there are, after all, epistemic facts to refer to, which determine whether something is true or false. However, in our line of thought, there is no factual backing to lend credibility to these direct responses. In other words, since we view epistemic sentences within the discourse as non-representative and expressions of our conative mental states or attitudes, it is only natural for people to wonder how we can account for such intuitive actions or behaviors in a different way than Ayer's.

Two points are worth noting here: First, as mentioned in the previous subsection, our theoretical objective aligns with that of epistemic realism in terms of valuing the epistemic discourse. Since it is generally accepted that people engage in this kind of practice without a strong relativist inclination in most cases, we seem to have a reason, premised on its practical utility, to believe that this intuitive rejection of epistemic relativism is sensible. This belief holds to the same extent that we have faith in the epistemic discourse itself, and can be understood from various angles. For example, embracing epistemic relativism could potentially compromise ordinary epistemic discourse, which typically facilitate our epistemic progress. After all, it is challenging to envision how we could advance our epistemic dialogues as usual when relativistic elements are substantially taken into account (more on this in a moment).

Second, at this juncture, some readers may notice a shift in our focus. Remember that realists' interpretation of our epistemic discourse is often seen as the conventional understanding. Within this traditional framework, we seldom consider alternative interpretations of the epistemic discourse, focusing instead on matching our epistemic judgments with epistemic facts. However, acknowledging that the standard narrative might not be the only way to comprehend our epistemic linguistic practice enables a more thorough scrutiny of its components. When epistemic realism is assumed, epistemic language's primary role seems to be fulfilling its mission as assigned by the realist pursuit, namely, accurately representing the world, just as in (other) situations where we make factual statements. In contrast, when epistemic realism is not deemed the necessarily correct approach, there is room to reevaluate our interpretation of epistemic language. This suggests that the traditional view, which associates epistemic language with the function of conveying our representation of states of affairs, might no longer be adequate for



characterizing and justifying its use. Indeed, some philosophers argue that examining normative language in a less theoretically burdened way can yield valuable reflections and uncover new avenues for inquiry, which is precisely why second-order normative study is worthwhile in the first place. One way to understand metaepistemological study's task is to view it as applying the four core areas of philosophy to the examination of epistemic language and thoughts.<sup>1</sup> These core areas of philosophical discussion encompass metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language. Drawing on this categorization, we can explore the elements within our epistemic discourse from the corresponding perspectives:

- (1) The perspective from metaphysics: The metaphysical status of what is at play in an epistemic question concerns what assures us that an answer to that question is right or wrong. This is particularly relevant when we face difficulty resolving epistemic disagreements, as we saw in the previous chapter. For instance, in real life, we often encounter complex epistemic conundrums that cause trouble, such as dilemmas that result in severe damage to established epistemic standards regardless of the decision made. These issues are so difficult to solve that people often give up seeking solutions and let them slide. If asked directly about the correct answer to such a perplexing question, they might say, "There might be an answer, but we don't know yet." Now that we have learned how one's second-order commitment is revealed in their beliefs and behaviors, we may notice that if their view of the metaphysical status of the answer to the question leans towards realism, their response would be more affirmative. Therefore, it turns out people tend to be more inclined towards a non-realist position when dealing with these conundrums. By contrast, mainstream epistemologists might not consider this inclination desirable and may openly claim that such a view is incorrect, asserting that there are correct answers to those conundrums (and thus tacitly committing to epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> The following perspectives of inspecting epistemic questions are modeled on Mark Schroeder's discussion of moral questions, see Mark Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 3.

realism).<sup>1</sup> Here, the discussion of the answerability of epistemic questions themselves is what metaepistemologists are interested in. If the debate is specifically triggered by, for example, the existence of a basis for disagreements over the issue in question, then it can be considered a metaphysical debate on the metaepistemological level.

- (2) The perspective of epistemology: The possibility of answering an epistemic question is not only related to the metaphysical nature of the potential response but also depends on the agents' capabilities, particularly their capacity to arrive at the correct answer. In other words, if the only one who could potentially provide the correct answer (in this case, a member of our own species, i.e., a human) is incapable of doing so from the outset, then the existence or non-existence of the proper response becomes irrelevant, because it remains unattainable anyway. Consequently, the epistemological exploration of why human beings are capable of knowing the answers to epistemic questions, such as the study of human cognitive faculties, becomes essential in metaepistemological reflection as well.
- (3) The perspective of the philosophy of mind: Epistemological studies focus on knowledge, and belief often plays a crucial role in the formation of this concept. However, the way people form their beliefs is also connected to another field that is usually considered independent — the philosophy of mind. In this regard, metaepistemologists may seek to understand the mental processes and structures that underlie our epistemic or cognitive processes. For instance, they might investigate the role that intuition, perception, memory, and reasoning play in shaping our beliefs and examine how these processes interact with or influence one another.
- (4) The perspective of the philosophy of language: When expressing our epistemic thoughts, we employ epistemic language, which brings the philosophy of language into metaepistemological studies. From this perspective, we may ask:

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<sup>1</sup> It might be interesting to note that the fact that even those who secretly have doubts of the answerability of epistemic or moral questions grow their doubt in the process of answering them somehow indicates that realism has some privilege when challenged by non-realism.

In what sense do we use words related to epistemology when posing an epistemic question? This involves examination of the meaning and usage of epistemic terms, such as “knowledge,” “justification,” “belief,” and “evidence.” Metaepistemologists might also be interested in exploring how context, linguistic conventions, and the structure of language can impact our comprehension and communication of epistemic concepts.

In short, metaepistemology concerns what epistemic discourse is about,<sup>1</sup> delving beyond the surface of language when discussing topics typically considered epistemology-related. This leads to reflection on four main topics: the thing that could provide us with the answers (the metaphysical perspective), the way we acquire such answers (the epistemological perspective), the process of forming our own answers (the philosophy of mind perspective), and the manner we exchange our answers (the philosophy of language perspective). By exploring these different perspectives, metaepistemologists aim to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the nature and scope of epistemic discourse. For metaepistemological realists, they presume that epistemic facts exist, and naturally suppose that the subject matters of our epistemic discourse ultimately hinge upon them no matter from which of the four perspectives listed above. In return, epistemic facts are also able to empower these realists with compelling answers to questions that we are interested in across the four sectors, as demonstrated by how epistemic facts can support realists when they grapple with the relativist challenge.

But why are we interested in metaepistemological questions? More specifically, why do we have these four core aspects to be concerned with? And why are they regarded as basic to start any philosophical inquiries? The answer can be complex, but at its core, it is simple: we are curious. We are curious about the world, about everything that we encounter, and about our own lives. We constantly seek to understand the mysteries and intricacies surrounding us. We wonder how reality comes into being, hence metaphysics;

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<sup>1</sup> To say that epistemic discourse, or more specifically, epistemic questions are about something obviously presupposes that there is something to be about/concerned with/connected to/etc. However, a metaepistemologist may argue that there is in fact no such thing. This position is often referred to as “non-descriptivism” (which has been mentioned earlier) since it implies that nothing is there to be described/represented/publicly accessed/etc. Ayer, for example, is often labeled as a non-descriptivist when it comes to ethical or aesthetic statements. This position can be found not only in metaepistemology or metaethics, but also domains such as mathematics.

we are then further pushed to question how this desire for knowledge can be satisfied, hence epistemology; we are also driven by such nature of inquisitiveness to investigate the background where this mental process happens, hence philosophy of mind; and finally, we turn to how all of this is conceived, pondered, and expressed, hence philosophy of language. While this is only a simplistic presentation, there is no doubt that the fact that we are innately curious is deeply intertwined with our impulse for philosophical reflection. And it naturally follows that we extend such inherent curiosity to more concrete experiences that we have, such as epistemic discourse. It may be noticed that at this point a question in respect with the legitimacy of this inquiry *per se* somehow emerges: to quench our thirst is indubitably good, but in what sense it is good and to what extent it brings benefits more than harm is not easy to ascertain. However, to pursue further will stray into beyond the scope of this dissertation. For our current purposes, the true significance that needs to be pointed out is that this inquiry into the second-order issues of epistemic discourse serves primarily to respond to our rational desire but not our practical requirement, for it is posed to an existing phenomenon that, so far, has been practically helpful. Contemplating how we are engaged in epistemic discourse might satisfy an inherent yearning for intellectual gratification, cater to an innate propensity to seek clarity, or fulfill a natural inclination to bridge gaps in reasoning. However, it does not necessarily exert a considerable influence on what we have already been doing, for reality never asks for recognition or requires our approval to exist.<sup>1</sup> Thinking from this angle will reveal that non-realism does not have to deny certain aspects of our practical life as in the simplified case of Ayer. Rather, as was argued in the previous section, non-realism may actually share the same goal, or at least some theoretical intention, with realism, as our tentative position does. While our doubts about epistemic facts remain, our path can still converge with realism as far as the objective of explaining and preserving the value of the epistemic discourse is concerned. As Simon Blackburn observes:

There is no real option to abandon conditional, moral, mathematical, etc., thought, even if we become squeamish about the existence of distinct states of affairs

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<sup>1</sup> Although they are still interconnected in a way that will be discussed in the next sub-subsection.

corresponding to our beliefs in these matters. We would like to continue behaving as though there were facts, even if we feel the anti-realist pull.<sup>1</sup>

The problem in front of us then, is how to provide such intellectual sustainability of epistemic discourse, albeit not necessarily required by our practice of epistemic language. Since we hold an epistemic expressivist position, we cannot take epistemic talks to be intrinsically about epistemic facts as the realists do. Therefore, to acknowledge or respect the fruitfulness of our epistemic discourse in a serious manner, we must explain to a satisfying degree why we have so much to say and gain by participating in epistemic dialogues and advancing the field of epistemology. In Schroeder's words, we are supposed to answer the question "if epistemic thought and language are not *about* anything, then what are they *for*?"<sup>2</sup> Obviously, there are various possible ways to respond to this question, and they lead to significantly different approaches under the banner of non-realism. And it has to be admitted that given the limited scope of this dissertation, we cannot provide a comprehensive comparison of all major competitors, discussing their theoretical strengths and weaknesses, nor can we explore all the different perspectives on what should be preserved.<sup>3</sup> However, I will attempt to present an initial observation on how we can address the relativist challenge in a more plausible way, though also at a certain cost, acknowledging that further exploration and analysis may be required for a more satisfactory resolution.

Since our position has been primarily developed by contrasting it with a paradigmatic interpretation of epistemic realism, I will focus on how epistemic expressivism can account for our epistemic discourse similarly to the latter. In other words, how epistemic expressivism proponents can develop a defense for canonically non-relativist epistemic discourse, like realists, by embracing the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis, but without relying on the Ontic Thesis. This choice may not be a fully

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, p. 20. Originally on "moral thought and language."

<sup>3</sup> For example, some of us may consider our epistemic language as a sophisticated system that can be idealized to the extent that every part of it functions in a logical way, but at the same time some other people may take it to be a much looser system that is able to run while containing inner clashes, and these different views will result in substantially different amount of work to deal with when we try to account for how this system works.

satisfying solution to the current discussion due to its potentially narrow scope, but it is made for three reasons: First and foremost, it is still our primary concern whether we are entitled to resort to relativism to resolve the epistemic disagreements about wisdom, so it is most efficient to directly connect these two issues and maintain our focus. Second, we have assumed that if epistemic facts exist, the realist argument will become essentially plausible. Therefore, if we can arrive at an argument alike without the worrisome presumption about epistemic facts, we will thereby make sense of and vindicate the epistemic discourse to the same extent. Lastly, as will be argued and elaborated later, this line of thought will lead to a potential problem that is highly relevant to our main topic, by addressing which this dissertation will be better positioned to contribute insights to the inquiry into the conception of wisdom.

Recall that the goal of arguments for metaepistemological realism is to establish a reason that is able to justify epistemologists' (and, as previously extended, also other people's) rejection of epistemic relativism. But if we pay full homage to the epistemic discourse, we should remember the fact that epistemic relativism can also draw on a portion of language data that support their own position, which we cannot refute to count as a part of what we are trying to preserve (e.g., assessment-sensitive relativism). Although the exclusive strategy that is employed by Carter indicates that philosophers may not be prepared for accommodating such particular linguistic data in a realist picture, it is imaginable how they could do so by invoking or implementing the principle that "If there are facts, believe in facts." in epistemic language practice. However, in our train of thought, there seems to be nothing as firm as epistemic facts that could ward us off the relativist temptation. If our reasoning stems from the practical utility of the epistemic discourse, then the accepted relativist usage of epistemic terms is an element that contributes to the success of our epistemological projects as well, and nothing appears to prohibit us from relying on it. So, the problem becomes what could possibly entitle us to rebut epistemic relativism in our commitment to the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis.

One direction of answering this question is to examine why facts are invoked in this context and explore alternative approaches that could fulfill the same purpose without compromising the intended function of the epistemic discourse. We mentioned earlier that a question concerning epistemic judgment typically expects a "yes" or "no" outcome based

on specific epistemic standards (such as the question of whether wise people are required to hold true beliefs, which prompted our examination of epistemic relativism). This is perhaps the kind of situation where the realist appeal is felt most strongly.<sup>1</sup> After all, the most determinate manner we can make an either affirmative or negative assertion seems to be seeking recourse to facts (or more precisely, the states of affairs that obtain), allowing us to confidently state, “As a matter of fact, he knows/is wise/etc.” or “As a matter of fact, he lacks knowledge/is not wise/etc.” While we have tried to downplay our commitment to reporting truth in previous sections, it is undeniable that facts remain the most reliable source for determining which epistemic standard we should follow. And the other side of our nearly irresistible inclination to stay in conformity with epistemic facts in the process of epistemic evaluation is that it is ultimately not up to us to decide whether a judgment is right or wrong, but rather the corresponding states of affairs. If the facts are not taken into account, and we consider our own process of epistemic assessment as at least partly constituting the outcome, then even under the most ideal circumstances, who is able to distinguish between right and wrong judgments?

In this hypothetical scenario, it seems improbable for anyone to make the ultimate decision without a reference point to ensure the correctness of any choice. However, this assumption only holds if we require someone, whether an ordinary person or an idealized figure, to have access to a blueprint before making the decision. But is it truly necessary to possess a detailed blueprint before constructing our ideal home? While we are surely better equipped when a blueprint is in hand, there are certainly beautiful houses built without blueprints readily available in advance, and it is not inconceivable for a perfect house to be created without a pre-existing design. Moreover, if we accept that a scenario involving the concept of “blueprints” can be idealized (i.e., we have a perfect blueprint, we can obtain such a blueprint, and we can build a beautiful home based on this blueprint), then we should also recognize that a house construction scenario without the concept of a “blueprint” can be idealized as well. We can imagine the following situation: A group of beings with no drafting skills but perfect communication abilities or faculties is trying to build a house that everyone will be content with; and through real-time coordination, collaboration, and

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<sup>1</sup> Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, p. 16.

flawless execution of instructions, they successfully fulfill their task without any help from a blueprint or things alike. If an idealized arrangement involving a blueprint can guide us towards the desired outcome (a perfect house), it seems there are no factors that would prevent us from achieving the same results in an idealized situation where a blueprint is never considered. For instance, in a context similar to that of the epistemic discourse, a group of people can communicate, interact, and collaborate in an idealized manner. Alternatively, in a more distinct context, an individual might possess exceptional powers of observation, insight, and execution, enabling her to make sound judgments without relying on a predetermined set of facts. Both setups appear to have a happy ending.

Furthermore, we can compare the idealized versions of these two scenarios as an additional examination. Even if we have discovered that both idealized approaches can produce the desired outcomes when there is sufficient support (such as the agent's capabilities and objective resources), some may still wonder whether the presence or absence of a blueprint in ideal circumstances would generate a noteworthy difference. For example, in a scenario with blueprints in hand, would there be fewer elements required to be added in compared to a situation without a blueprint? In other words, would we encounter lesser pressure from having to make extra assumptions when a blueprint is available? On the other hand, we could also explore whether a scenario without a blueprint is easier to achieve. Considering that the notion of a blueprint being important and helpful stems from our ancestors' accumulated experience, a situation in which people have no inclination to seek a blueprint may be more primal. There is no doubt that numerous intriguing and meaningful comparisons can be made. Regrettably, space constraints prevent us from diving into each of them here. Nevertheless, given our repeated references to the difficulties of locating epistemic facts — understood here as metaphorical blueprints — we should realize that not relying on something's assistance is, at the very least, no more difficult than depending on the help of something whose location remains uncertain.

Once we step outside the box, our perspective will no longer be confined to the belief that the ultimate answer must be there beforehand. Indeed, it seems absurd to suggest that if a blueprint goes missing, a construction site would come to a halt, as if workers could no longer perform their trained skills and supervisors suddenly lose their expertise in guiding the construction process. This is not to undermine the significance of having a



blueprint, but its value certainly does not lie in that we are incapable of creating anything without one. By concentrating on the real building process, we can better understand that our judgments about specific situations or claims do not have to depend on referring to a blueprint for verification. We are able to offer sound feedback by employing a range of techniques, including but not limited to observation, comparison, consulting others, drawing on examples, and building on experience. And through incorporating our own opinions into the collective feedback and engaging in discussions with others, we can develop more widely endorsed viewpoints. In this sort of scenario, or more specifically, in the epistemic discourse, it is foreseeable that if our opinions clash with those of others, we are likely to use statements like “As a matter of fact, my opinion is more reasonable” to express our persistence in our views and refute others’ ideas, hence the impulse to commit to the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis. Nevertheless, using phrases like this does not imply that we are genuinely citing specific facts. On the one hand, given the difficulty in finding supporting facts, it is unlikely that we even believe that such facts are at our disposal whenever we make such assertions. On the other hand, our primary goal in this context is not to represent the corresponding states of affairs, but to demonstrate that what we hold are more rational, more acceptable, or simply better. And to meet this objective, what we can do, and what we actually do in daily conversation is to show that what we maintain is more persuasive, more universally applicable, etc. For example, if we want to demonstrate that our conception of “knowledge” is more compelling than someone else’s, we typically present an argument that constructs a more appealing narrative based on our understanding of knowledge. Or else, we may reference other situations to show that our comprehension can be applied more seamlessly to various contexts, requiring lesser effort to adapt. These processes seem not to undergo significant changes due to the absence of the blueprint concept.

However, we should be aware that one theoretical consequence of putting aside the concept of facts is that we should not even expect to reach a final outcome (an absolute outcome or multiple relative outcomes), rather than simply not anticipating consensus with everyone in practice. Distinguishing between the two idealized scenarios allows us to see that even in the latter situation, our actual participation in the epistemic discourse may not be noticeably affected. Nonetheless, if we are required not to presuppose an ultimate result,

could this have a more profound or even substantial impact on us regardless of the superficial practical similarities? Admittedly, this is a complex topic that is definitely worth further research, but for the problem at hand, we only need to determine whether our currently useful epistemic discourse takes an accepting, resistant, or ambivalent attitude towards the relativization of epistemic judgments in practice.<sup>1</sup> Since our practical engagement with and utilization of epistemic discourse does not shy away from being consistent with the approach supported by realists, our first small progress is that we do not have to avoid what the realists suggest, namely, that relativism should be rejected because it has difficulty fitting into our epistemic discourse. The next issue that our attention should shift to is then the degree to which our practice aligns with the depiction made by the realists. At least, on the surface, the extent of their overlap is quite significant, as we only disagree with one of the three theses emphasized by realism as accurate portrayals of the actual situation. Will giving up the Ontic Thesis result in a noticeable change in our stance on relativism? The answer seems to be no. It is important to note that while the existence of facts offers us reasons to rebut relativism that the platitudes about epistemic facts cannot tolerate, as previously mentioned, the second-order discussion presented here is primarily an attempt to justify our practices rather than serving as a causal factor initiating them. In other words, our inclination to make assertions is not reliant on the contentious Ontic Thesis put forth by the realists. As long as we recognize our inclination to make assertions, it becomes difficult to accept a relativist attitude. This is, again, because if we were to embrace relativism, we would be unable to hold fast to the belief that our perspective or certain views are correct while dismissing differing opinions as wrong (whether we are indeed right about this judgment or not), as it would suggest that all perspectives hold equal validity. Additionally, we would not be able to refine our judgments effectively by comparing them to and understanding the rationale behind others' arguments.

Arguing from the fact that relativistic attitudes are not typically considered in epistemic linguistic practices does not imply that we initially have a reason to oppose epistemic relativism. Instead, what serves as justification for such an approach is still the

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<sup>1</sup> Although this point is indeed connected with the problem that we are going to mention at the end of this chapter.

practical utility that the epistemic discourse provides. This, once again, can be compared to our discussions about taste. People often express opinions about taste as if they were making absolute statements (“Coke tastes better than Pepsi.”), similarly to how we make epistemic judgments in the epistemic discourse. Today, a growing number of people have come to realize the futility of expressing judgments about taste in this manner, and many have started advocating for greater tolerance regarding personal preferences. However, this change in attitude does not stem from discovering previously unknown information that we should avoid discussing taste in such a way. Rather, the rise in tolerance towards personal taste is essentially driven by the increasing agreement that it is inconsequential to our actual interests, leading people to avoid expending effort on the unproductive endeavor of trying to sway people’s tastes. While the assumption of the supposed lack of benefit in discussing taste is debatable, this is not the case for our epistemic discourse. In fact, it is difficult to challenge the idea that our epistemic discourse has witnessed substantial advancement. It has yielded fruitful outcomes, and some of its positive results have been recognized as truth, albeit in varying senses. For example, with the help of the development of scientific theories, our understanding of the natural world has greatly improved, and the frameworks and methodologies for evaluating knowledge claims have been updated accordingly, allowing us to have more confidence in distinguishing between well-founded and poorly founded beliefs. In light of these achievements, the possession of knowledge is now widely recognized as essentially a physical state. At the same time, supporting instances can also be found in fields traditionally less associated with “science,” or even in ancient history. In any case, the point is clear: ultimately, the progress made in our epistemic discourse demonstrates its practical utility and value in enhancing the understanding of our epistemic process and refining our epistemic activities.

One of the two unresolved concerns from Sub-subsection 2.1.1 relates to the strength of support we can obtain from our line of thought regarding the potential rejection of epistemic relativism. In this sub-subsection, we can determine that although our tentative position, namely, epistemic expressivism, narrows our focus to a more manageable and less challenging range of theses about our engagement in epistemic discourse, we can still be justified, like the realists in their idealized situations, in concluding that relativism should be rejected as far as the prevalent epistemic linguistic practice is concerned. As a

result, in the mainstream context, we are provided with valid reasons to seek definite, rather than relative, answers to the epistemological questions of interest in this dissertation. However, before diving into the discussion on wisdom, it is important to realize that our chosen approach, like perhaps any other approaches in philosophical discussions, comes with both advantages and disadvantages. The support we gain from epistemic expressivism has been demonstrated to come at the cost of lacking ultimate answers to the questions at hand, which is apparently related to the remaining concern of future uncertainty when proceeding with our inquiry based on this specific theoretical framework. In the next subsection, after introducing some other potential problems that we might encounter, we will examine this consequence more closely.

### 2.2.2 Challenges to Epistemic Expressivism

Expressivism is now typically considered the primary representative of noncognitivism (or even as noncognitivism itself),<sup>1</sup> and thus faces some traditionally most significant and also most challenging issues associated with this school of thought. As previously noted, in a very general sense, noncognitivism in metaethics is a position taken when we regard moral beliefs as something different from ordinary beliefs. However, we do not usually find our use of “belief” in a context related to morality different from our use of it in ordinary scenarios. There are many similarities shared by both of them, e.g., features like the interpersonal disagreement property (that people can disagree with each other about one’s moral status), the intrapersonal disagreement property (that a person cannot simultaneously possess inconsistent moral beliefs), phenomenological property (that we have certain feeling of how having a belief is like), functional role (that beliefs causally interacts with one’s desires), and the variability of confidence (that we are more confident of some beliefs than others).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, an immediate question one may have in mind is: Why bother differentiating them? After all, a commonly accepted principle in philosophical discussion is the principle of parsimony, which is also often known as

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<sup>1</sup> Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Occam's razor, that when it is unnecessary to introduce something new to a theory, it will be better not to do so.

The other side of this question is that although turning to polysemy might be a conceivable option, it is generally not considered a preferable theoretical solution. What is more important is that this choice does not seem fitting, given that we consistently convey the same meaning when using the term "believe" in different situations. For example, when people use "believe" in religious contexts, ethical discussions, or everyday conversations, the term appears to maintain a consistent meaning despite the different situations in which it is employed. Since people generally do not seem to distinguish between the use of the term "believe" in a noncognitivist context and its usage in other contexts that even noncognitivists would consider ordinary, the noncognitivists are burdened with the need to account for why we can express two sorts of things with the same use of a word, and how we are doing so without any awareness in normal situations.

Furthermore, readers may have noticed that the scope of our discussion has been limited too soon, since believing a proposition is only one of the many possible attitudes that we may have regarding a proposition. For example, when it comes to a proposition P, we can desire P, doubt P, approve or disapprove P, etc. The existence of numerous propositional attitudes may pose a challenge to noncognitivists for the reason that even if they are able to explain how we can believe a proposition in a noncognitivist way (while also believe certain propositions in the ordinary way), they still need to provide explanations for other attitudes that will trigger the same problem but are not necessarily similar to believing, and the number of potentially required explanations may be infinite.

These three problems mentioned above are concluded by Mark Schroeder as the three main problems that the noncognitivists are faced with in explaining our moral language and moral thoughts, named respectively as "the *Multiple Kinds* problem," "the *One Word* problem," and "the *Many Attitudes* problem."<sup>1</sup> The first and third issues can be seen as arising from a negative outlook on the potential for completing the noncognitivist task in the area of philosophy of mind, and the second issue primarily deals with concerns

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

within the philosophy of language.<sup>1</sup> Although his discussion of these problems focuses on noncognitivism in metaethics, there is no obvious difficulty for us to find them also challenging for metaepistemic noncognitivists. Essentially, they are all problems that we encounter when we try to understand the noncognitivist use of ordinary language to express attitudes towards propositions. To put it in another way, the central issue underlying all these difficulties that we face when trying to assimilate and accept the noncognitivist portrayal of how we express our normative thoughts is how to reasonably distinguish the noncognitivist use of language from our ordinary linguistic practices, given that they do not both refer to some types of entities (or the same type of entity), and simultaneously account for the phenomenon that we employ words that can be interpreted both noncognitivistly and ordinarily in strikingly similar manners. To grasp the intricacies of this matter, we must adopt a more comprehensive perspective and scrutinize these problems within the broader scope of our systematic language use: Since we can employ and interpret words in a similar fashion, regardless of whether they are intended to convey noncognitivist or ordinary meanings, noncognitivists are required to coherently explain how we can derive meaning from sentences containing such words in the way we do, as they are supposed to express different meanings in different contexts. A well-known challenge from this point is presented in the form of the Frege-Geach problem, which could be more easily understood as an embedding problem since we are in a non-metaethical context (we have met problems of this sort in the last chapter).<sup>2</sup> The core of the Frege-Geach problem lies in the following contrast: Noncognitivists (or in Geach's paper, anti-descriptive theorists) believe that "predicating some term "*P*" — which is always taken to mean: predicating "*P*" assertorically — is not describing an object as being *P* but some other 'performance'."<sup>3</sup> For example, in our tentative line of thought, when we make an

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>2</sup> P. T. Geach, "Assertion," *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 4 (1965), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183123>. According to Schroeder, philosophers have noticed this problem long before Geach. For example, William David Ross, *Foundations of Ethics: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen, 1935*, vol. 15 (Oxford University Press, 1939), cn. 2. And Geach was not the only one who challenged noncognitivists, as similar doubts can also be found in, for instance, John R. Searle, "Meaning and Speech Acts," *The Philosophical Review* 71, no. 4 (1962), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183455>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2183455>. (Cited in Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, p. 43, p. 48.)

<sup>3</sup> Geach, "Assertion," p. 461.

epistemic assertion, we express our thought that we think certain epistemic features can be ascribed to certain subjects, rather than describe the fact that they have such-and-such epistemic features as epistemic realists assume. When only propositions like “She knows it./She is wise./etc.” are taken into account, both the received epistemic realism and our approach can offer meaningful interpretations that can be easily understood. However, this equilibrium between the two sides changes when the complexity of sentences increases. In everyday conversation, we often combine sentences conveying these propositions with other ones and make compound sentences like “If she knows it, she should not have done that.” If we follow epistemic realists and read the original example sentence that

“She knows it.”

as conveying the proposition, say,

“It is the fact that she knows it.”

the meaning of the compound sentence is then:

“If it is the fact that she knows it, she should not have done that.”

and we find nothing strange in this process of semantic integration. But when we take the epistemic expressivist route and interpret the compound sentence with

“I think that she knows it.”

the result we have will be

“If I think that she knows it, she should not have done that.”

which does not only appear to be a rude requirement that we impose on other people, but also a misunderstanding of what we usually want to express by saying “If she knows it, she should not have done that.” (At least, we want to sound more objective when we utter such a sentence.) Similar cases can also be found when we extend our consideration to linguistic phenomena such as negation, tag questions, etc. And what is problematic here is that this goes against a sensible presumption that what we usually have: “A THOUGHT may have just the same content whether you assent to its truth or not; a proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same

proposition.”<sup>1</sup> In plainer language, when a sentence is used without intending to convey a fundamentally different meaning, regardless of how it is combined with other linguistic elements, its core meaning (or more arguably, the underlying proposition) should remain unchanged. In addition, as this central meaning becomes part of the new sentence’s meaning, the overall understanding should still be intuitively clear. Just as in a typical scenario of ostensive communication, we point to something and make a judgment about its features, without considering the correctness of the judgment, we should be able to incorporate the resulting proposition (e.g., “It is the fact that this is a pen.”) in various sentence structures, whether simple (e.g., “This is a pen.”) or complex (e.g., “If this is a pen, then we can use it to write.”). Throughout these different forms, the core proposition that we express remains the same. Since we expect ordinary assertions to function in this particular manner, noncognitivists are consequently tasked with providing an explanation for why normative assertions operate differently.<sup>2</sup>

Explaining why normative assertions work differently does not necessarily require noncognitivists to concede that normative assertions are fundamentally distinct from ordinary assertions. It is conceivable that noncognitivism could develop an explanatory framework that functions as effectively as the commonly accepted one, ensuring that simple normative sentences remain recognizable and comprehensible within more complex sentences that include them.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Frege-Geach problem has garnered significant interest from both opponents and proponents of noncognitivism. As each side seeks to advance their respective positions, philosophers on both sides have proposed various projects and continue to propose new ones to challenge or defend noncognitivism’s core idea. Regrettably, again, due to the space (and time) constraints, an in-depth exploration of

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 449. Geach calls this view “the Frege point” about assertion.

<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, a simplified version of the Frege-Geach problem for our current purposes. But the presentation is intended to be general to include more relevant problems other than the problem of explaining the validity of *modus ponens* argument that the Frege-Geach problem is probably most known for. (Cf., Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, p. 54.)

<sup>3</sup> Schroeder holds that an argument for the optimism about a satisfying noncognitivist semantics of this style was first provided by Hare (which was long before Geach and Searle’s respective version of Frege-Geach problem, see Hare, *Language of Morals*.), and later J. J. Smart has also given a similar one in 1984 (J. J. C. Smart, *Ethics, Persuasion, and Truth* (Oxford University: Oxford, 1984). Cited in Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, p. 55.).



these significant issues including but not limited to the three main problems and the Frege-Geach problem has to be omitted.<sup>1</sup> While these problems are highly challenging, considering that the received epistemic realist story also has its own difficulty to deal with (as has been shown in Chapter 2 and this chapter), they do not necessarily invalidate noncognitivism as a potential alternative. Moreover, these challenges do not seem to be insurmountable either. It may be a bit excessive to say that we do not need to stick to the old-fashioned belief that any new method for explaining our assertoric expressions has to imitate the traditional approach.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, if people have managed to tolerate epistemic realism for countless generations without ever determining where epistemic facts reside, it should not be too much of a stretch for them to wait and see if noncognitivists can eventually develop a fitting new semantic system.

That having been said, we must address a crucial issue within our line of thought. Recall that in Sub-subsection 2.1.1, two potential problems were mentioned, and one remains unsolved, namely, that the practical utility of the epistemic discourse is based on

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<sup>1</sup> Especially the new approaches explaining the meaning of complex sentences under the banner of expressivism (which is obviously what I have in mind when the term “epistemic expressivism” is introduced), which has been famously developed by Simon Blackburn (Blackburn, *Spreading Word; Essays in Quasi-Realism.*) and Allan Gibbard (Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Harvard University Press, 1990); *Thinking How to Live* (Harvard University Press, 2003).). The main idea of expressivism is that there is a stable relation between our desire-like attitudes or conative mental states (e.g., one’s disapproval of stealing or one’s acceptance of a norm that does not allow stealing) and the corresponding normative judgments (e.g., stealing is wrong), just like the relation between our beliefs (e.g., I believe that grass is green) and their corresponding facts (e.g., grass is green). (Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, p. 72.) Briefly speaking, the point here is that expressivists do not argue against the ordinary thinking that we express normative propositions by making normative assertions (so *prima facie* the embedding problem will not be threatening), but they maintain that normative sentences are systematically connected with certain mental states or attitudes (hence a noncognitivist semantic framework in prospect). It might be helpful to view the noncognitivist approach, which includes expressivism, as a form of “underlying-semantics revisionism” that aims to maintain the content of our normative judgments while dismissing the idea that the true meaning of our normative sentences is what they appear to be on the surface. (Alexander Miller, *Contemporary Metaethics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Polity, 2013), p. 185.)

Nevertheless, explorations of these approaches have to be omitted here, as the scope and objectives of this dissertation require a focus on subject matters that are directly related to the questions concerning wisdom and can be addressed within the confines of this work. Despite this omission, future research on these topics remains important for a broader perspective.

<sup>2</sup> Geach has already observed that “[w]hen philosophers fail to see the Frege point, the reason, all too often, is that they have in general little regard for formal logic as a philosophical instrument.” (Geach, “Assertion,” p. 464.) And I think that even outside of philosophy, disregarding the Frege point is outrageous, and anyone doing so should provide a good reason for their choice, which will become an extra theoretical burden compared to adhering to the previously established expectation.

past experience and is thus not guaranteed. Since our discussion thus far has largely hinged on the idea that we have a practical reason to take the epistemic discourse seriously and are therefore motivated to find a convincing reason for accepting it, it might be tempting to view this as simply a question of the sustainability of the epistemic discourse's practical value. After all, if it were not practically useful, it is difficult to imagine why we would bother defending it. However, this issue is more complex than it initially appears. To view the problem in such a simplistic manner seems to suggest that our goal is to merely supplement the practice with an explanation, creating a separation between the practical utility of the epistemic discourse and the intellectual satisfaction derived from understanding its practical success.<sup>1</sup> But is this separation truly intended, and if so, can it withstand scrutiny? The answer to both questions is negative, but let us begin our examination by focusing on the latter.

(i) An apparently unrelated question may serve as a useful starting point here: What is the core purpose of introducing the noncognitivist or expressivist program? It would be misleading to portray noncognitivism's central idea as simply providing an alternative account for normative assertions, as doing so would not seem to hold substantial philosophical significance. As Geach has observed, this approach does not even conflict with the standard understanding of normative assertions. The fact that they can be interpreted in a new way may simply be an additional facet of their fundamentally similar nature to other assertions we come across in various contexts.<sup>2</sup> Although epistemic realism may have flaws and may not be essential for engaging in epistemic linguistic practice, both its proponents and opponents (such as error-theorists) recognize that it is the default way we conceptualize our epistemic discourse. This implies that, for most people, epistemic realism is not an element associated with the epistemic discourse that requires extra efforts to accept. And therefore, from the ordinary perspective, the typical expectation for assertions is none other than what realists would suggest, namely, representing facts. As a

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<sup>1</sup> A view like this may develop in a manner similar to the idea that scientific developments are not concerned with either realism or anti-realism, as seen in Arthur Fine, "Unnatural Attitudes: Realist and Instrumentalist Attachments to Science," *Mind* 95, no. 378 (1986).

<sup>2</sup> Geach, "Assertion," p. 464.

result, the purpose of adopting a noncognitivist stance is not merely to hold a different view, but to embrace one that seeks to replace this ordinary understanding.

But what precisely is the function of this ordinary understanding that we need to address in order to take its place? What is the real philosophical significance of this pursuit of representing facts that we must consider within our line of thought? One may recall another point from Sub-subsection 2.1.1 that there is a close connection between the Ontic Thesis, the Speech Act Thesis, and the Alethic Thesis. We learned that confirming the Ontic Thesis would subsequently support the other two, as it simultaneously serves both as an explanatory and a justifying reason for accepting them. If we want to replace the standard understanding of the epistemic discourse, we need to provide something that either fulfills the same role or negates the intuitive appeal of the unreplicable. Thus far, we have managed to explain why we should embrace the epistemic discourse based on its practical utility, and illustrate that the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis can stand as usual without the Ontic Thesis, as they are simply descriptions of what we actually do driven by our epistemic desires. Indeed, a recurring theme in the previous and current sections is that our engagement with the epistemic discourse unfolds naturally and progresses at its own pace, regardless of the validity of the realist ontic commitment. So far, so good. However, the focus of our approach seems to be mostly limited to addressing what we believe to be necessary components individually, without considering the combined effects of the realist presuppositions. Have we, therefore, overlooked any aspects that emerge from their combination warranting further consideration?

(ii) This question matters, particularly when we realize that epistemic realism seems to be unaffected by the issue raised by our reliance on past experience. A simplistic interpretation of the problem is that although we can justify our past use of epistemic discourse based on previous outcomes, we should not neglect the potential challenge concerning the sustainability of this justifying reason. Practical usefulness is usually determined based on our existing observations, specifically those on record up to this point. Similar to the inherent limitations of inductive reasoning, we cannot confidently predict future practical utility solely based on the evidence we have gathered so far. Just a single unprecedented case could be enough to overturn all the hypotheses made, exposing the precarious nature of basing predictions on past experiences. This understanding does reveal

some potential issues that we might face, as it is natural to ask: How should we continue to make use of the epistemic discourse as effectively in the future as we have done in the past?

Of course, there is something that we can do. We previously mentioned that theorizing our epistemic discourse caters to our intellectual desires, and ensuring its continued effectiveness is one aspect of satisfying those desires. Through the examination of available data, we can discern the underlying patterns and principles that govern our epistemic discourse, find out potential weaknesses and areas for improvement, and ultimately enhance the robustness and efficacy of the epistemic discourse in the long run. In essence, we can view theorization as an instrument for refining and adjusting our epistemic discourse. By persistently analyzing and reflecting on the data and outcomes of our previous experiences, we can make informed modifications to ensure — or at least make a beneficial effort to preserve and promote — the practical value of our epistemic discourse.

However, the fact that we can do something about it does not guarantee that we can succeed in achieving our goal. An optimistic view of the epistemic discourse's continued usefulness might be countered by a more pessimistic argument,<sup>1</sup> emphasizing that historically, theories used to explain scientific success have often been proven false. By analogy, the mainstream epistemic discourse could also be proven false, despite the extent of its fruitfulness. This pessimistic outlook on our approach may intensify to the point where even the past practical utility could be called into question. Nonetheless, what is important is not how skeptical we could be (that will be beyond the scope of this dissertation) but rather, understanding why this particular concern troubles us so much.

A natural response to this question is that we are inadequately prepared for this challenge. In contrast, a position like epistemic realism, with the Ontic Thesis serving not only as a guiding principle for the continued use of the epistemic discourse but also as a solution to this particular issue, is clearly better equipped in this regard. Although the Ontic Thesis itself raises doubts, at least in the ideal scenario envisioned by epistemic realism, epistemic facts exist and are easily accessible. Given our natural tendency to rely on facts

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<sup>1</sup> Modeling on the pessimistic meta-induction argument from Larry Laudan, "A Confutation of Convergent Realism," *Philosophy of science* 48, no. 1 (1981).

when they are available, we always have a strong basis for trusting our epistemic discourse, which is founded upon the uncovering of these facts. In other words, by presupposing the existence of accessible epistemic facts, epistemic realism legitimizes the operation of our epistemic discourse once and for all — the Ontic Thesis provides a substantial support for the phenomenon concluded in the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis. But for us, even in the most ideal scenario, epistemic expressivism cannot supply the guarantee in need to the same extent, as drawing conclusions from future data is inconceivable.

Considering the success of epistemic realists, it seems advisable for us to explore how we might learn from and mimic their approach in addressing this challenge. When we say that epistemic realists strive to preserve the epistemic discourse, they do so not only by providing a unique account appealing to epistemic facts, but also by reinforcing the legitimacy of the epistemic discourse through the presumption of these facts. As such, epistemic realism serves both as a supplementary theoretical framework to our epistemic linguistic practice, and as an assuring element, justifying the utility of our epistemic discourse. If our goal is also to defend the epistemic discourse, we need to find a way to achieve similar objectives. But this does not sound right — we have already discussed this topic and presented how epistemic expressivism can accomplish these tasks. So, what are we missing?

It may have come to readers' attention that there appears to be a tendency in our line of thought to account for the epistemic discourse by no more than attaching specific explanations to the actual phenomenon. After acknowledging that the practical utility of our epistemic discourse suggests that it functions effectively in some sense, this position seems reluctant to provide further theoretical support for our practice, as it merely tries to depict our actual use of language, and does not expect the epistemic discourse to respond in any way (although we are indeed not saying much<sup>1</sup>). By contrast, epistemic realists view the epistemic discourse and epistemic realism as intimately intertwined elements. They not

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<sup>1</sup> There is somewhat obviously a quietist inclination in this line of thought. Though to delve any deeper will exceed the boundaries of this dissertation, this inclination could be characterized as “It wants to eliminate certain kinds of attempts at philosophical theory, or certain kinds of reflections on our practices and the world. In particular, it wants to eliminate the kind of thinking that leads either to *real* realism, or to the constructivist views that offer alternatives to that; it wants not reflection, but silence.” (Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 124.)

only reflect upon but also advocate for what they believe to be the theoretically ideal way—that is, the normative requirement for us to employ normative language. The merit of doing so is evident: as the practice, guided by their principles, closely aligns with their theoretical assumptions and expectations; epistemic realism, in its full strength, would lay a promising foundation for our engagement with the epistemic discourse. From this perspective, it makes sense that epistemic realism and the epistemic discourse are often intuitively accepted as a cohesive pair, even though the nature and location of epistemic facts remain elusive. What follows is that the answer to whether we should separate the theory about the epistemic discourse from the actual practice is *prima facie* negative. If a theory seeks to replace our ordinary understanding, it must either take on or negate the dual responsibilities of justifying both past experiences and future prospects of the epistemic discourse, standardly fulfilled by this powerful combination. Therefore, we cannot easily separate the theoretical explanation of our practice from the practice itself. As our tentative position also aims to maintain the ordinary epistemic discourse, the answer to the first question concerning our intention to create such a separation appears to be likewise negative (more on this in (v)).

But this leads us back to the question of how epistemic expressivism can achieve this goal. At first glance, the primary concern with epistemic expressivism might be its potential inability to cover every aspect we expect from a metaepistemological theory like epistemic realism. In our tentative approach, the Ontic Thesis is absent, but at the same time the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis are still committed to, which means we are supposed to make some assertions and tell at least some epistemic sentences that contain true information from those containing falsehoods in the epistemic discourse. While we can certainly make some sense of what these requirements amount to,<sup>1</sup> and justify them from a practical point of view, it is important to remember that assertions,

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<sup>1</sup> Expressivists are often thought to lean towards deflationism (or more specifically, minimalism) regarding properties, according to which certain predicates can be attributed without substantive ontological or metaphysical commitments. What matters then is how the predicates are used in a logically or grammatically correct manner, rather than the properties they are conventionally assumed to “represent” (hence, the predicates are deflated or minimal). In our case, by adopting the deflationist perspective, both the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis can be interpreted in such a way that assertions about rightness, wrongness, truth, etc., are made without committing to anything of substantive depth or going beyond the context (therefore no prior acceptance of the Ontic Thesis is needed).

truth, and facts are commonly thought of as interconnected. The content of an assertion typically contains a proposition, and a proposition is typically considered true or false, depending on its correspondence to facts. Now that epistemic facts are missing in our line of thought, even if we can justify our past commitment to the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis from a practical perspective, epistemic expressivism, due to its lack of ontic commitment, may appear to fall short compared to the standard realist account and offer little theoretical help. This difficulty is not necessarily unsolvable, for expressivism has proven to be quite resourceful in addressing various challenges that many philosophers assumed it could not handle. As for the concerns that expressivism should provide similar solutions as realists, expressivism can, in fact, mimic realism to the point where, in some cases, it becomes hard to distinguish these two positions.<sup>1</sup> That said, we will in this dissertation emphasize and explore another crucial question: Are we indeed supposed to offer something on the theoretical side?

(iii) One might be prompted to consider this question upon realizing that epistemic expressivism may struggle to take on the realist-style task of providing comprehensive and robust support for the legitimacy of our epistemic linguistic practice. Whether it seems like an excuse or not, expressivism is ultimately not realism, and this divergence bears significant consequences on our confidence in the strength of epistemic expressivism's mimicry of realism. Regardless of how effectively epistemic expressivism may counter realism (e.g., by challenging the plausibility of realism's entire approach and reconstructing our understanding of normative thought and language), or how closely it may resemble a genuine realist position (e.g., by systematically explaining our normative thought and language in a manner similar to realism), at the end of the day, epistemic expressivists see the epistemic discourse as arising from human dispositions or subjective mental states that cannot be considered as anything beyond the reach of our own, and therefore cannot be deemed objective in an absolute sense. This lack of objectivity in

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<sup>1</sup> Whether this situation itself is a problem depends. For example, Blackburn observes that in ethics "it is not what you finish by saying, but how you manage to say it that matters." (Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, p. 168.) But some philosophers may find it worrisome, e.g., James Dreier, "Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004). For the reasons mentioned above, this is not the appropriate place to delve into the debates between proponents and opponents of expressivism, nor is it suitable to conclude whether its resemblance to realism is a positive or negative attribute.

explanations of our epistemic discourse presented by the epistemic expressivist approach is understandably a cause for concern. As Blackburn has astutely observed, “in my experience this explanation is apt to leave a residual unease. People feel uncomfortable with the idea that this is the true explanation of our propensity to find and to respect values, obligations, duties, and rights. This unease is perhaps rather like that of nineteenth-century thinkers who found it so difficult to do ethics without God.”<sup>1</sup> But the key concern that needs to be stressed here is not about how well epistemic expressivism can fulfill and replace the functions of realism, or how much it might fall short of certain expected functions. Instead, the main issue is that epistemic expressivism fundamentally cannot provide a certain function, and it might not have to intend to provide such a function, irrespective of whether its competitors can achieve it under ideal circumstances or not.<sup>2</sup> In the current discussion, the function is initially interpreted as ensuring the future practical utility of our epistemic discourse. This interpretation, though simplistic, reveals that the essence of this function is to provide us with a certain entitlement or assuring elements to continue engaging in our current practices. In the realist narrative, this function is fulfilled by offering substantial theoretical support to justify our involvement in the practice — that is, objectively, there are epistemic facts, and our epistemic discourse as a process of discovering such facts is plausible. But on what grounds can we claim such entitlement? Considering it from this angle, it becomes clear that a special standpoint is implied, one which allows us to review the entire course of our practice and assess its performance. As we recognize the presumption of this particular perspective, we soon realize that its application extends beyond addressing concerns about the sustainability of the epistemic discourse to other issues that may manifest in various ways depending on different aspects, such as the error-theorist accusation of systematic errors. Then, what is the nature of this special perspective?

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<sup>1</sup> Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, p. 153. Though note that Blackburn is talking about his quasi-realist program here, which he believes has successfully accommodated the propositional grammar of ethics.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning that realism is not the only stance that attempts to preserve the current shape of our epistemic discourse, no matter the challenges it faces. For instance, a fictionalist may concede that our normative discourse has issues or even accept the criticisms raised by error-theorists, yet still propose “a change that a group can make in its attitude towards a faulty discourse,” which is “Keep using the discourse, but do not believe it.” (Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 185-86.)



When engaging in epistemic discourse, we naturally participate “in” the discourse, giving us an internal perspective on our thoughts and interactions. Throughout this process, we gather various statements, arguments, and dialogues from both ourselves and others. By examining these elements, we are then able to analyze our methods of participation, the underlying assumptions guiding our expressions, and the patterns that shape our communication, etc. This analysis helps us better understand how the epistemic discourse works and serves as an explanatory tool. However, many, if not most, theorists believe that systematically theorizing our epistemic discourse requires not only an account developed from within the internal perspective but also supplementary support from an external perspective. Recall the earlier discussion of epistemologists tacitly committing to metaepistemological realism as a reason to reject epistemic relativism; it was mentioned that realists fail to provide a justifying reason for accepting the realist account beforehand, which makes it difficult to understand why we should follow their reasoning and reject epistemic relativism. This is where the need for an external perspective arises.<sup>1</sup> If realists could access epistemic facts, they might be able to meet this requirement; however, in the case of epistemic expressivism, there seems to be no means of fulfilling this requirement at all. Cuneo has noted this perspective issue in one of his analyses of the epistemic expressivist projects:

That there is an internal epistemic perspective few would doubt. But it is very hard to see how there could be anything like an external epistemic perspective that one could intelligibly occupy. That is to say, it is very difficult to see how there could be a perspective in which a person at once engages in theoretical inquiry and does not believe (or take it for granted) that there are epistemic reasons. After all, anything we could recognizably call ‘theoretical inquiry’ or ‘inquiry from a naturalist perspective’ involved viewing ourselves as assembling reasons, epistemically evaluating claims, offering arguments, and so forth. In short, anything we could recognizably call theoretical inquiry requires taking not the external, but the *internal* perspective. To which I add, even if it were the case that the external perspective could be coherently occupied, it is hard to see what point there might

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the term “the external perspective” is being considered here in a broader sense. This may lead to some initial confusion for readers familiar with its more limited use in discussions about metaethical irrealism, which will be introduced shortly.

be in doing so. For it is not a perspective in which there could be — or in which we could take ourselves to offer, accept, or reject — reasons for any claim.<sup>1</sup>

Cuneo's overarching objective in this argument is to show that epistemic expressivism fails to provide what is necessary for accounting for epistemic discourse "from the 'disengaged' or 'theoretical' perspective."<sup>2</sup> In the realist landscape, an external viewpoint could be understood as referring to an objective, fact-based view that allows us to evaluate the validity of our epistemic discourse independently of our subjective attitudes and thoughts. Since the ability of a metaepistemological theory to instill confidence in the soundness (or potential soundness) of our epistemic discourse typically relies on a favorable examination from an external viewpoint, epistemic expressivism is unable to guarantee that our epistemic discourse is free from fundamental flaws or support it as effectively as standard theories do, for the setting of the external perspective is ultimately absent in epistemic expressivism from the outset. As a result, Cuneo is indeed accurate in

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<sup>1</sup> Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 171. "Theoretical inquiry" is originally a quotation from Terry Horgan, "Contextual Semantics and Metaphysical Realism: Truth as Indirect Correspondence," in *The Nature of Truth*, ed. Michael P. Lynch (Cambridge: MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 90. in "The external perspective, by contrast, is supposed to be the perspective of the naturalist philosopher who in Terry Horgan and Mark Timmon's words is engaged in 'metaphysical speculation' or 'theoretical inquiry', but believes that there are no epistemic reasons or facts." with "metaphysical speculation" quoted from Mark Timmons, *Morality without Foundations: A Defense of Ethical Contextualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 152. (Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 170.)

<sup>2</sup> *Normative Web*, p. 174. This one of the two objections Cuneo raises against this version of epistemic expressivism. I will not discuss the other objection here, as it seems to impose some unwarranted requirements on the expressivist approach (Cuneo himself admits that it "rest[s] on several assumptions that not all philosophers would accept." (ibid., p. 166.)). By "this version" I refer to what he labels as minimalist expressivism, which commits to that "there is a sense in which epistemic quasi-propositions, quasi-truths, and representation relations exist," but "epistemic facts are mere virtual entities, enjoying at best an ersatz mode of existence." (ibid., p. 174.) I assume this is an acceptable general characterization of a plausible expressivist position. Stances adjacent to this, on one side, are what he calls "traditional expressivism" that maintains that "there are no epistemic facts of *any* sort, and the content of our epistemic discourse neither purports to represent epistemic reality nor is truth-apt in any sense" (e.g., the abovementioned Ayer's account) and thus fails to capture ordinary epistemic discourse; and, on the other side, "maximalist expressivism" that claims that "there are epistemic facts more robust in character than mere virtual facts and that epistemic claims are representational in a non-robust sense." (ibid., p. 182.) Cuneo considers the latter approach undesirable, for "it is not defensible — in part because it cannot account for there being genuine or 'serious' representation." (ibid.) It can be argued that there are once again some requirements forced upon every expressivist on this route, but I also find the underlying worry, namely, that "serious representation requires that there be strong epistemic norms — norms such that, if one fails to conform to them, one thereby suffers a rational failure" a natural one. However, it is natural in the sense that we are talking about — the expressivist story lacks an external perspective for reviewing our epistemic activities and determining whether ultimately, they are successful or unsuccessful in an objective sense. Thus, addressing the perspective problem would also equip us with a response to this concern.

noting that epistemic expressivism cannot attain a wholly “external” perspective, as it is simply not a component of the expressivist framework. But, at the same time, it is important to acknowledge that, within our line of reasoning, preserving epistemic discourse—or more specifically, avoiding systematic falsehood — does not depend on any recognition from the external viewpoint either. Realists tend to claim that without an external perspective, a crucial justification for employing epistemic discourse is absent, but this is based on the assumption that such external justification is necessary (and, implicitly, that realists can provide it). Some proponents of epistemic expressivism may point out that certain irrealist theories can indeed offer what their opponents require,<sup>1</sup> and I am sympathetic to this kind of view, as I believe acquiring external support is favorable. Nonetheless, I argue that Cuneo’s conclusion misses the mark, as in the end, such justification is not essential.

(iv) This contention may seem confusing to some readers, as it appears that we previously rebutted the realist proposal precisely because that it cannot justify itself. However, it is important to note that what has truly been argued is that realism is not necessarily what we need for a metaepistemological theory. To put it more straightforwardly, we did not outright reject realism in metaepistemology; instead, we simply pointed out that epistemic realism involves a contentious ontic assumption concerning the existence of epistemic facts. In contrast, epistemic expressivism is also capable of accounting for our epistemic discourse, but with lesser ontic burden and a greater advantage in addressing the motivation problem. To illustrate this point, we raised the concern that epistemic realists need to justify their position beforehand, as the supporting evidence for them, namely epistemic facts, remains unclear (in terms of its location, the way to access it, etc.). As a result, we did demand for certain justification, but this demand primarily relates to the realist assumption of epistemic facts, rather than external justification itself. Realists assume that epistemic facts exist and function as a justification (an external one, evidently) for their viewpoint, and they are therefore responsible for explaining the origin of such justification. Since our support for the

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<sup>1</sup> A possible example may be Mark Timmons’s treatment (of what he calls the argument from moral error that questions the irrealist’s ability to address the common-sense expectation that genuine moral errors are possible) in Timmons, *Morality without Foundations*. But I remain reserved about how conclusive the proposed justification could ultimately be.

epistemic discourse stems from practical reasons, we are not internally obligated to rely on an external perspective for validation. In other words, the absence of external justification does not inherently weaken the validity of our interpretation of epistemic discourse, as it is never founded on the external perspective.

On the other hand, readers may recall that we also argued that an external perspective is not indispensable from an extrinsic standpoint either. Although the absence of external justification is a natural cause for concern, it is just as natural as our desire for the epistemic discourse to keep functioning effectively and is equally as theoretically nonessential as that desire. Indeed, if it is not to satisfy our desire for a stable and predictable future, it becomes difficult to see the rationale behind making a theory responsible for maintaining the future of our practice. In the response to the error-theoretical objection, we mentioned that a key feature of epistemic discourse, when interpreted from a practical standpoint, is its intervenability. Given that we can intervene in the course of our epistemic discourse and address identified problems, we can argue that the practice is not systematically mistaken. Although this approach also implies that it is not always guaranteed that epistemic discourse would not make mistakes, this does not have to become a problematic issue. A good theory can certainly enhance our understanding of our practice and guide us towards improvement, and an ideal theory in an idealized situation might even provide a complete blueprint for constructing our epistemic discourse, helping us avoid all possible errors. However, even without a good or ideal theory, epistemic discourse can still proceed at its own pace. As long as we view epistemic discourse (or any discourse) as an ongoing process of human interaction, no theory about this process will take precedence when considering the practice itself — for it is the ongoing practice that we are trying to theorize, and the future of this process is not determined by the theory that attempts to explain and justify it. Therefore, while having a realist account to ensure a positive outlook for epistemic discourse is favorable, it is not an essential requirement for all second-order theories that account for the process of our epistemic linguistic practice.

(v) However, it is also here the true potential problem for our current line of thought emerges — that is, the real consequence of not being able to provide a guarantee for future practical utility of our epistemic discourse. In point (i), it has argued that the prevailing

epistemic realism supposedly offers something that helps us devoid the concern of drawing conclusions from the past. For epistemic expressivism to replace the standard story, it should either take on this function or deny its appeal. Point (ii) demonstrated that the function in question is a form of substantial theoretical support for our practice, suggesting a close interconnection between the theory accounting for our practice and the practice itself. Nevertheless, epistemic realism fulfills this function by implying an external perspective, which has been shown in point (iii) and point (iv) to be both impossible and unnecessary for our tentative position to achieve. Should we then simply deny the appeal of this kind of theoretical support based on this conclusion? That does not seem appropriate, as offering something for our actual practice from the theoretical side and providing an external perspective for the epistemic discourse are two separable matters. Viewing the issue from this angle reveals that if we fully follow the reasoning presented in (iv), we risk again merely “attaching” our theoretical efforts to the existing practice instead of providing any significant help, which is not the original intention of the argument. Therefore, we must be cautious about this move and investigate what else the external perspective brings into the picture.

Up to this point, we have primarily discussed two types of scenarios: the realist narrative, which assumes that epistemic facts exist and have an impact on us, and the expressivist narrative, which disregards their impact, whether they exist or not. However, in our line of thought, it is easy to forget that realism is often invoked in discussions when our shared theoretical objective needs to be achieved, particularly when the meaningfulness of our epistemic discourse is questioned. Epistemic realism is not only incompatible with our approach, as its presupposition of epistemic facts’ existence precludes suspending judgment on the claim’s truth, but it also conflicts with other approaches that negate the support it offers from the external standpoint. It is crucial to note a further detail: When epistemic realism appeals to the external perspective, it tacitly commits to not only the existence and accessibility of epistemic facts, but also the assumption that this perspective produces positive outcomes for it, such as external justification for our epistemic discourse. Conversely, error-theorists, while they also acknowledge the presence of some sort of external perspective, draw the conclusion that our epistemic discourse is fundamentally flawed, as they reject the realist ontic thesis. We have argued that having an external

perspective does not necessarily introduce indispensable elements to our understanding of the epistemic discourse. However, unlike epistemic realists, epistemic expressivism falls short in negating the negative conclusions drawn from a seemingly external perspective. This is because our conclusion that a practice can proceed without an external perspective does not exclude the possibility of a negative external evaluation. Consequently, there is indeed another aspect that epistemic realism can provide but we cannot that has been overlooked. And the remaining question is — should epistemic expressivism address this negative outcome, even though it is not required to offer anything like the external perspective itself?

The answer is affirmative, and the crux of the matter is that a negative assessment can indeed negatively affect our actual practice of epistemic discourse, especially by fostering a pessimistic attitude. Consider a fresh graduate who is about to look for her first job. The scenario in which she does not pay special attention to her future and the scenario in which she maintains a positive outlook towards her future do not fundamentally differ as far as the process of seeking a job is concerned. She will, regardless, look for information about various jobs, create resumes and send them out, attend interviews, learn from failures and get excited for improvement, and so on. However, if she were to adopt an extremely pessimistic attitude towards her future, the situation could change dramatically. She might lose the motivation to find a job, stop believing in her own abilities, become disheartened by the job search, and eventually give up on her potential and the job-seeking process altogether. Similarly, in our case, if we were to adopt a negative metaepistemological prospect, our ordinary engagement with the epistemic discourse could change dramatically too. We might lose the motivation to participate in epistemic discourse, question the possibility of ever reaching an endpoint in our discussions, doubt our capacity to find ultimate answers to epistemic questions, and perceive our epistemic thoughts and language as meaningless. Consequently, we could become disheartened by the epistemic discourse and in the end, stop engaging in this process altogether.

An optimistic second-order theory, when equipped with support from the external perspective, can preclude its negative counterpart. However, for epistemic expressivists, there seems to be nothing available to fill the space where people naturally expect an external review. This is because our tentative position is developed based on the practical

utility of the epistemic discourse, which cannot guarantee its own future. While epistemic expressivism does not necessarily need to satisfy this desire, if a negative result seemingly responds to it, the self-evolution of our epistemic discourse could be halted, which is something epistemic expressivism does not want to see, as it would lead to a self-defeating conclusion, in the sense that the practical aspect from which we develop our theory would cease to exist because of our lack of preparation. It is important to note that, in this situation, not only would the current shape of our epistemic discourse be lost, which is acceptable in our line of thought, but also the entire course of our epistemic linguistic practice. Consequently, we would fail in our theoretical goal of preserving ordinary epistemic discourse, as there would be nothing left to preserve.

To take stock, the simplistic understanding of the potential problem of sustaining the practical utility of the epistemic discourse in the future reveals that there is something that epistemic realism is able to offer that we should learn about. And it turns out to be a kind of significant theoretical support for the continued engagement with our epistemic linguistic practice, which implies an external perspective to examine our epistemic language and thoughts. While epistemic expressivism both cannot and do not need to offer such a perspective, there is a deeper desire behind the common inclination to rely on this external standpoint that we should respond to. The real concern arising from this lack of external justification is how to prevent the emergence of a negative view that could potentially hinder the practice of our epistemic discourse from within. Without the support of an external justification, it becomes challenging to counter pessimistic attitudes that may arise and threaten the ongoing engagement with epistemic discourse. Such negative views could lead to a weakening of our commitment to the pursuit of epistemic good, ultimately undermining the very foundation of our epistemic discourse, i.e., the practice *per se*.

The remaining option to address this concern points to negating the necessity of possessing such a natural inclination. Although it has been argued that metaepistemological reflection is not essential to our epistemic linguistic practice, once we become engaged in it, we may still be influenced by relevant thoughts, potentially putting our practice at risk. In such a situation, we can offer certain additional reasons that encourage us to let go of our natural inclination to seek support from the external viewpoint, and thus eliminate the possible space for the problem to emerge. In other words, what we can provide from the

theoretical side as a support for our practice is a negation of, rather than a substitutional way to satisfy our natural propensity. In this sense, expressivism is not only able to address the concern of basing our theory on past experience, but also maintain the mutually supporting relationship between the theory and the practice. It is worth noting that by examining the issue from this perspective, the strategy we adopt naturally arises from our more fundamental treatment of the epistemic discourse, which entails viewing it as a process developed based on our epistemic desires. Since negation also serves to respond to our desires, we are not introducing a new element exclusively for this potential problem, but rather applying what is already present in our line of thought to a specific issue.

Presenting the details of the solution to this problem is one of the missions of the next chapter, where we will find why this problem, when combined with the discussion of the questions about wisdom will become more engaging and compelling. At this stage, what we need to bear in mind is the potential challenge associated with the absence of an external perspective as we provide some answers to the questions about wisdom in the current context of the epistemic discourse. This discourse, understood through the lens of epistemic expressivism, operates as a process driven by our epistemic desires.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

After carefully examining various theoretical attempts to vindicate epistemic relativism in the previous chapter, we found that while epistemic relativists face numerous challenges, it is difficult to conclude that their position has been decisively defeated. Rather, epistemic relativism appears to be an option that has been unfairly dismissed by many theorists. It may have its own drawbacks, but so do competing epistemological theories. In this chapter, however, we discovered that by focusing on the actual operation of epistemic discourse, we have a deeper reason to dismiss relativism in epistemology, as it goes against some prevailing and essential features of our epistemic linguistic practice. In order to preserve our useful epistemic discourse, it is advisable for us to reject epistemic relativism for now.

Different approaches exist to understand this deeper motivation and achieve the objective. In the first section of this chapter, we explored three strategies. The first strategy



is to argue against epistemic relativism since it would fundamentally transform the current shape of epistemic discourse, but it fails to demonstrate why this is unacceptable. The second strategy is to show that epistemic relativism is incompatible with the second-order position that our epistemic discourse tacitly commits to, but it also fails to demonstrate why our metaepistemological position has been chosen correctly. These two strategies can only provide an explanatory reason for why we are motivated to disregard epistemic relativism, but they are unable to offer a justifying reason for doing so. In contrast, the third strategy argues that the dominant epistemic discourse in real life precludes epistemic relativism, and history has proven its practical utility, leading us to believe that its implicit second-order commitment is sensible to a satisfactory degree. As a result, the mainstream exclusion of epistemic relativism is not only explained but also justified based on its practical outcomes.

Nevertheless, the standard story of epistemology presents a different understanding of our epistemic discourse, positing that there are mind-independent epistemic facts (that are accessible to us), and our epistemic judgments are either correct or incorrect with respect to whether they align with these existing facts. In this realist interpretation, it is epistemic facts that are primarily important, which could, when recognized and cognized aright, guarantee the utility of epistemic discourse. While epistemic realism indicates that epistemic relativism should be rejected, there is a problem in that proving the existence of accessible epistemic facts is extremely hard. The most evident issue is identifying such facts and understanding how we can access them. As Blackburn says: “We have to see our concepts as the product of our own intellectual stances: how then are they suitable means for framing objectively correct, true, judgement, describing the mind-independent world as it in fact is?”<sup>1</sup>

Considering that epistemic realism remains the default choice that mainstream epistemologists implicitly commit to, in the second section, we delved into the rationale behind this phenomenon, and examined if the plausibility of it can be taken over to our line of thought. By contrasting epistemic realism with our position in light of challenges from

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<sup>1</sup> Blackburn, *Spreading Word*, p. 198. While in this book that we are citing, Blackburn’s main focus was on metaethics, he quickly pointed out that, “It is not only moral truth which starts to quake. But we can learn how to approach the general problems of truth by starting with it.”

one of its major adversaries, namely, error theory, we concluded that the goal of preserving our epistemic discourse is shared, and consequently, we face the same challenges. But unlike epistemic realists, we opt for a theoretically less burdened route that leads us to epistemic expressivism. This position enables us to enjoy a more advantageous position when it comes to the motivation problem of epistemic facts, and to justify the operation of our epistemic discourse without relying on the contentious ontic presupposition of epistemic facts. We thereby respond to error-theorists and achieve our theoretical goal by viewing our epistemic linguistic practices as a process driven by our epistemic desires, so that it is intervenable and cannot be accused with systematic error.

However, in philosophy, gains often come with losses. In this case, turning to the practical usefulness of our epistemic discourse as the primary justifying reason for the epistemic discourse also brings its own issues. And the most prominent one is that even at its best, it cannot provide the kind of substantial theoretical support for our epistemic discourse as epistemic realism would in an ideal situation (where epistemic facts are available to us), which is a kind of external perspective that is typically sought to justify the entire course of epistemology. The consequence is that our epistemic linguistic practices are not supported by our theoretical reflection once and for all as in the realist case, for practical utility is only referable regarding past experience, but not guaranteed in the future. To address this concern, we should provide an alternative theoretical support for our practice, one that negates our inclination to rely on such an external perspective. This conclusion will have a significant impact on how we lead our inquiry associated with wisdom in the next chapter: On the one hand, we are entitled to have certain answers to questions about the concept of wisdom, e.g., whether it is required for wise people to hold true beliefs. On the other hand, the answers that we are able to find are not certain to the extent that they are usually anticipated to be. As we now view epistemic inquiries as a dynamic process initiated by our epistemic desires, with which we can actively intervene, our theorization of wisdom becomes both more complex and engaging.

## Chapter 4: Wisdom as the End of Epistemic Process

**Chapter Abstract:** Based on the process understanding of epistemic linguistic practice as integral to the successful broader epistemic process, this chapter embarks on an exploration of a more plausible way to theorize wisdom in light of prevailing offerings from the epistemic discourse. The discussion begins by examining the exemplary question about the truth condition for wisdom theories in the context of mainstream epistemological considerations of truth. Through refining and aligning the traditional view with epistemic expressivism, an interpretation of wisdom as the ultimate pursuit of epistemic process is developed. However, the confluence of these two lines of thought also brings the persistent issues between epistemic realism and epistemic expressivism into the discussion of wisdom. After highlighting the theoretical advantages of epistemic expressivism, the pragmatic turn is introduced as an approach to addressing the concern about the external perspective. This sets the stage for a more detailed examination of the proposed wisdom concept's plausibility in the following chapter.

In Chapter 3, we positioned epistemic expressivism as an alternative to the conventional metaepistemological stance, namely, epistemic realism. This perspective allowed us to perceive our epistemic discourse as a sequence of actions and interactions aimed at satisfying our epistemic desires. However, from this perspective, while the outcomes of our epistemic discourse are fruitful, they come without an absolute guarantee of their future usefulness. Although the lack of future certainty for our past findings is not necessarily problematic, this uncertainty could foster doubts about the value of engaging in epistemic discourse. If these doubts become so pervasive that they lead to the abandonment of the discourse itself, it suggests a self-defeating nature that could render our engagement meaningless. Consequently, it appears advantageous for theorists to confront this issue, either by enhancing the credibility and significance of our involvement in the epistemic discourse, or by exploring different, equally beneficial responses.

These general observations yield two crucial conclusions, setting the stage for us to continue our investigation of wisdom — the central interest of this dissertation. The first

conclusion is that we can confidently derive answers about the epistemic concepts that we employ, including wisdom, especially when examined from an epistemological standpoint. The first section of this chapter will delve into this aspect and draw on the offerings of the current epistemic discourse. Our inquiry will begin with the question of whether wisdom inherently demands the possession of true beliefs. This question not only exemplifies the type of debates surrounding the essential characteristics that a theory of wisdom should encompass, but it also leads to a confluence of our conceptualization of wisdom and our interpretation of the broader epistemic discourse. Viewing our epistemic discourse as a process alters how we theorize not just wisdom, but numerous other epistemic concepts as well. However, the shift in understanding wisdom goes even beyond, as it portrays wisdom not just as another epistemic notion, but as the potential culmination of this process, the final destination that our epistemic desires are guiding us towards. This, in turn, introduces a novel way of theorizing wisdom that is even more profoundly connected with our earlier discussions of epistemic discourse.

The second conclusion acknowledges the inherent fallibility of the conclusions drawn from the current discourse and the potential uncertainties that may need to be addressed. Section 2 will tackle such concerns from two perspectives. First, it will demonstrate how our line of thought provides solutions to both specific and general epistemological issues, thereby enjoying certain advantages over other positions. Second, a persistent issue arises in terms of whether our project can satisfactorily account for our epistemic discourse as effectively as traditional epistemic realism. Upon closer examination of the true nature of this issue, it will be proposed that the response needed is not necessarily how to achieve what epistemic realism is expected to yield. Rather, the issue can be addressed without satisfying the underlying concern. This dual approach to potential problems will lay the foundation for developing a more informative theory of wisdom in the next chapter, based on our newly established understanding of its theorization.

## 1. Wisdom and Veritism<sup>1</sup>

Our first chapter concluded by narrowing the focus to an important question in theorizing wisdom: Should a theory of wisdom necessitate that the wise hold true beliefs? It was proposed that by examining whether the beliefs contributing to one's wisdom must inherently be true, we could gain insights into other significant aspects of our conceptualization of wisdom, thereby effectively developing our wisdom theory. While concentrating on this single question may initially seem to simplify our task by reducing the immediate issues to tackle, it essentially shifts our attention from the overwhelming number of problems to the more intricate, underlying issues common to all. Among these, a particularly challenging issue arises from the uncertainty over the existence of absolute answers to our central questions. This uncertainty, stemming from the presence of seemingly contradictory yet plausible answers in existing literature, led us to Chapter 2. There, we considered whether epistemic relativism, which is known for its ability to accommodate divergent viewpoints, could provide a solution. Our exploration continued in Chapter 3, where we laid the groundwork for this chapter by giving a justifying reason to trust that our current epistemic discourse can offer non-relative answers despite the complexities. Now, holding the expectation that the conclusions drawn may cast light upon other significant questions within the wisdom theorization, we are prepared to revisit our key question regarding the relation between wisdom and truth.

This section will begin by running over the debate surrounding wisdom's truth condition in Subsection 1.1. To shed light on this issue, we will introduce veritism in Subsection 1.2, a widely accepted epistemological position that we can find in our epistemic discourse. Veritism, in a broad sense, posits that the fundamental epistemic good is truth. Our exploration of it will cover some different interpretations of veritism (Sub-subsection 1.2.1) and its associated challenges (Sub-subsection 1.2.2). In Subsection 1.3, it will be proposed that veritism can be examined in the context of wisdom, where veritism's own defense grounded on virtuous inquiry can be reinterpreted. That is, wisdom,

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<sup>1</sup> This section is a significantly revised and expanded version of an article originally published as Ji-peng He, "Wisdom and Veritism," *Tsinghua Studies in Western Philosophy* (forthcoming).

rather than truth, can be viewed as the fundamental good from the perspective of being the ultimate epistemic goal of virtuous inquirers, a standpoint that veritism purports to embrace. (Sub-subsection 1.3.1) Out of three strategies to further develop this reasoning, the one that treats the essence of wisdom as a special subset of truth appears to be most plausible (Sub-subsection 1.3.2). This strategy not only holds the potential to unite our discussions on wisdom and veritism but also to align it with our epistemic expressivist line of thought, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the theorization of wisdom in terms of our epistemic process and epistemic discourse (Sub-subsection 1.3.3).

## 1.1 Wisdom and Truth

It would be beneficial to recapitulate the various theories of wisdom in contemporary analytic epistemology to refresh our memory of the issue at hand. Chapter 1 outlined that epistemologists primarily characterize wisdom by three aspects:

- (1) Epistemic character-traits and capacities: As a preliminary requirement, a person is proposed to first possess a range of intellectual virtues, making her a competent epistemic agent, before qualifying for the designation of being wise.
- (2) Epistemic objectives: These are the intended accomplishments that an individual, equipped with the character-traits and capacities mentioned above, must strive for. Despite their potentiality, epistemic agents need to cognize and comprehend certain matters to earn the label of wisdom. This thought should reflect in their attainment of an epistemic status or standing, such as justified belief<sup>1</sup>, knowledge,<sup>2</sup> or understanding.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, wisdom does not span all domains or topics but is confined to specific scopes (e.g., theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom<sup>4</sup>), and is pertinent to particular subjects (e.g., all wisdom

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Grimm, "Wisdom," p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom," p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> Whitcomb, "Wisdom," p. 101.

should maintain a relation with *eudaimonia*<sup>1</sup>). Thus, for one to be deemed wise, the beliefs they hold must be relevant to these scopes and subjects.

- (3) Application of Epistemic Outcomes: Wisdom is often perceived as implying the ability to utilize one's beliefs to achieve desirable results. Yet, when encapsulating this intuition into theoretical requirements, many philosophers favor potential dispositions over actual outcomes, mainly due to the challenge posed by counterexamples.<sup>2</sup> Reducing the intuitive expectation to a mere matter of disposition significantly narrows the scope of wisdom theorization, rendering it less comprehensive and demanding than commonly anticipated. For instance, in Grimm's account of wisdom, he posits that general wisdom considerably hinges on knowing how to live well, which is comprised of three types of indispensable knowledge. Although Grimm does not overtly require the application of such knowledge, some scholars have realized that it aligns with those theories that are explicit on this point.<sup>3</sup> And Grimm is not overlooking this aspect either; rather, he suggests that true knowledge inherently carries a disposition to act,<sup>4</sup> thus there is no need for a separate mention. Regardless of the accuracy of Grimm's interpretation of knowledge, his thinking exemplifies a trend among contemporary epistemologists: the cognitive components of wisdom tend to overshadow the practical ones. Consistent with this trend, while recognizing the value of the practical facet, this dissertation focuses mainly on the two cognitive ones listed above.

It goes without saying that wisdom involves the formation of beliefs and the ability to justify them. Thus, given the perspectives discussed in points (1) and (2), at a minimum, wise individuals should be required to form justified beliefs. However, relying on justified beliefs alone can lead to contradictory concepts of wisdom. For example, one individual

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<sup>1</sup> Yu, "Three Kinds of Wisdom," p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Whitcomb, "Wisdom," p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Jason Baehr, "Wisdom, Suffering, and Humility," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 53 (2019): fn. 36, pp. 406-07, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-018-9677-2>.

<sup>4</sup> Grimm, "Wisdom in Theology," p. 198.

may find great significance in worldly experiences, such as a social activist who reasonably and passionately believes in the possibility and desirability of societal improvement. In contrast, another might dismiss such experiences as having no value, like a monk who perceives perceptions and ordinary life as mere illusions, and also reasonably believes that genuine contact with reality transcends these mundane confines. Despite their diverging beliefs, both individuals could be regarded as wise. Therefore, introducing a “truth” condition into a theory of wisdom becomes favorable. This ensures that the beliefs held by those deemed wise correspond to objective facts, thereby preventing such discrepancies. As for determining which beliefs constitute “true beliefs,” that task does not necessarily fall upon the philosophers who are focused on developing theories of wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of our present discussion, let us provisionally stipulate that any epistemic status primarily consisting of justified true belief is to be considered as knowledge. In this context, it naturally follows that when a theory of wisdom incorporates a “truth” condition, it implies the requirement of knowledge. Within this framework, it might become more understandable why Grimm directly reduces wisdom to knowledge. Further, viewing his account from this aspect, the emphasis is not placed upon the requirement of possessing knowledge, but “true” beliefs — that is, irrespective of the circumstances (even in an illusory or hallucinating world), the possession of true beliefs remains an indispensable element in the conceptualization of wisdom.

However, while the need to avoid theoretical contradictions appears to necessitate the inclusion of a “truth” condition, numerous examples suggest that not all beliefs held by wise individuals are expected to be true. For instance, many paradigmatic figures of wisdom may not possess a multitude of true beliefs due to the temporal and spatial constraints of their existence. Should we evaluate the proportion of true beliefs within their overall body of beliefs, we might find that a majority of their beliefs are indeed false. Nevertheless, when thinking about the embodiment of wisdom, these figures are often the first to come to mind. On the other hand, some philosophers argue that a theory of wisdom need not include a “truth” condition.<sup>2</sup> They propose hypothetical scenarios such as a

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<sup>1</sup> As Grimm suggests, this is an issue that the metaphysics of wisdom should address. (*ibid.*, p. 194.)

<sup>2</sup> Ryan, “Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality,” p. 107.



character living within a simulated reality, similar to the Matrix, where every belief that one could possibly hold is false due to the very nature of the illusory environment. This character, despite being confined within the Matrix and hence holding fundamentally untrue beliefs, can still be perceived as wise and able to dispense wisdom that is applicable in the real world. Such a scenario introduces a counterexample to Grimm's viewpoint, suggesting that wisdom may still manifest itself even in the absence of truth.

Grimm acknowledges that such scenarios may provoke perplexing intuitions. However, he maintains that while the imaginary figure in these scenarios might seem "wise" to a degree, she does not fully achieve wisdom. This character demonstrates certain aspects of wisdom, mainly through her possession of two types of knowledge that Grimm considers fundamental to wisdom: knowledge of what is good or important for well-being (Grimm's first condition), and knowledge of how to attain what is good or important for well-being (Grimm's third condition). Nonetheless, she lacks the knowledge of her own position in relation to what is good or important for well-being (Grimm's second condition). As a result, even though this character might appear closer to wisdom compared to most individuals, her unawareness of her own state disqualifies her from achieving complete wisdom.<sup>1</sup> This observation once again underscores a crucial aspect of Grimm's theory: even if a person's epistemic status overlaps wisdom to a degree, they are perceived in such a way due to their relevant knowledge to that same degree. Grimm thus emphasizes the necessity of holding true beliefs when appraising one's wisdom, regardless of the extent to which one is considered to embody wisdom.

McCain classifies the aforementioned scenario as what he terms a Cartesian counterexample, and he contends that Grimm's response adequately addresses the concerns it poses. Yet, he introduces another type of skeptical situation, as presented by Schaffer, which is exemplified in the "debasing demon" scenario.<sup>2</sup> In these situations, victims lack a suitable basis or any reason for holding a belief, due to interference from certain demons. McCain argues that if two individuals have exactly the same true beliefs, corresponding dispositions, and are supported by equivalent evidence, then it is reasonable

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<sup>1</sup> Grimm, "Wisdom," pp. 147-48.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Schaffer, "The Debasing Demon," *Analysis* 70, no. 2 (2010).

to consider them equally wise.<sup>1</sup> However, a victim of a debasing demon, although possessing all these elements, might still lack an epistemic basis to satisfy Grimm's second condition of wisdom — knowing one's own position relative to what is good or important for well-being. As such, this scenario serves as a counterexample to Grimm's view, suggesting that wisdom may not require the possession of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> While McCain's counterexample initially demonstrates that beliefs can contribute to wisdom without fulfilling Grimm's criteria, considering the agreement between Grimm and McCain on the necessity of true belief and the major difference in their conceptions of wisdom lies in the epistemic agent's epistemic basis, we can examine his example from another angle — whether a theory of wisdom needs an additional condition to the truth condition, that is, being epistemically grounded.<sup>3</sup> (More on the implication of this alternative interpretation in subsection 1.3)

The discourse so far reveals various possible responses to the question of whether the beliefs held by the wise must be true: an unconditional affirmation (viewed as a theoretical necessity), a conditional affirmation (as seen in judgements where wisdom is not always requiring a grasp of true beliefs, and in Schaffer's skepticism), and an outright denial (exemplified by Cartesian skepticism). Although there may still be other responses, the options that we have come across, while inconsistent with each other, each possess their

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<sup>1</sup> Or more accurately, being seemingly wise to the same extent.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin McCain, "What the Debasing Demon Teaches Us about Wisdom," *Acta Analytica* 35 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-019-00420-1>.

<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation, the appropriate epistemic basis/ground is intentionally left undefined. This allows for flexibility as it can be interpreted in different ways by epistemologists from different schools (internalism, externalism, etc.). This flexibility does not significantly impact our argument. Nevertheless, a few potential interpretations can be listed for illustrative purposes: Intuitively, an epistemic basis might be understood as a justification, which leads to considerations including the traditional distinction between internalism and externalism about justification in epistemology, and the distinction between personal justification (i.e. the epistemic subject is justified to believe so) and doxastic justification (i.e. this belief is justified). More specifically, the nature of the basing relation can be examined, presenting two main alternatives: the doxastic view and the causal view. The former emphasizes that the meta-belief that "the good reason R providing an epistemic basis for a belief about the proposition p" is necessary or sufficient for a basing relation, whereas the latter maintains that an epistemic basis is given in the sense that it leads an epistemic agent to form the belief in question. For relevant discussions, readers can refer to works such as Mylan Engel, Jr., "Personal and Doxastic Justification in Epistemology," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 67, no. 2 (1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4320325>; Keith Allen Kozel, "Recent work on the basing relation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1997).

own degree of plausibility. This divergence seems to leave us in a challenging position when deciding which approach is most convincing. Fortunately, our exploration through Chapters 2 and 3 now equips us with the resources to navigate this complex terrain. As argued in the previous chapter, despite the lingering problem of certainty, our epistemic discourse provides a justifying reason to acknowledge the legitimacy of its evolution and certain dominant features (for instance, certain features sufficiently motivate us to dismiss the relativistic treatment of epistemic notions). And a significant characteristic of our epistemic discourse is its relentless pursuit of truth, a tradition we can refer to as “veritism” for brevity’s sake (more on this shortly). This tradition, in its essence, regards truth as an indispensable ingredient in our pursuit of any epistemic good, and wisdom is no exception. This essentially rules out any negations of the truth condition in wisdom theories as untenable. And it follows that only responses affirming the necessity of truth in wisdom theories are worth considering. Yet, our exploration has uncovered potential grounds for negative answers, which seemingly contradicts the veritist framework. To put it more plainly, a paradox arises here because, from a veritist perspective, any arguments leading to negations of the truth requirement inherently appear flawed. Nevertheless, the evidence we have encountered so far invites an understandable debate over the role of truth in wisdom theorization. Tying this discussion back to Chapter 3’s conclusions, we find that a framework emerges not only for scrutinizing these responses, but also for illuminating a potential conflict between the following three claims: (i) The conclusions drawn in Chapter 3 are correct, and we have valid reasons to rely on the dominant features of our epistemic discourse. (ii) Veritism represents one of these reliable dominant features, implying that any theories of epistemic good, wisdom theories included, should not omit a truth condition. (iii) There are plausible debates over the truth condition in theories of wisdom. (i) and (ii) suggest that a theory of wisdom must include a truth condition, while (iii) introduces the possibility of this not necessarily being the case, thereby causing a contradiction. This preliminary and simplified depiction of the potential conflict will be refined as we proceed. But before we delve deeper into the rationale behind this, let us first examine more closely what veritism entails.

## 1.2 Epistemological Veritism

Though the introduction of veritism may appear abrupt, a brief reflection should reveal that the commitment to truth is far from an alien idea. Rather, it is a cornerstone of epistemology, deeply rooted and intuitively familiar to us. As mentioned in Sub-subsection 2.1.2 of Chapter 3, we do have a natural inclination to seek truth, and this in itself offers a reasonable explanation for the emergence of veritist thought. However, some might argue that this is an oversimplification that merely relies on instinctive tendencies. To such concerns, we could also take into account epistemologists' long-standing acceptance of the well-established tradition of veritism, which should offer a more solid rational basis for this inclination. According to Duncan Pritchard, there exists a dominant view in epistemology that asserts truth to be the fundamental epistemic good, a standpoint that used to be seldom challenged.<sup>1</sup> This position could be referred to as veritism, or epistemic value truth monism, as it claims that truth is the only epistemic good with non-instrumental, i.e., final epistemic value.<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity and clarity throughout this dissertation, the term "veritism" will be primarily used, although some subtle nuances behind choosing the appropriate label will be explored further in the subsequent sections.

### 1.2.1 What is Veritism?

Veritism can be understood as positing that truth holds a central role in two aspects of epistemology: On the one hand, conceptually, we determine something's epistemic nature based on its relation with truth; if a concept or thing is related to epistemology, then it must somehow pertain to truth. On the other hand, axiologically, during an epistemic appraisal, we see truth as the fundamental good, with other good valued instrumentally for their ability to promote truth. This is similar to the situation where we evaluate something's aesthetic worth, we consider beauty the fundamental good, and judge other aesthetic values based on their contribution to beauty. These two aspects can be separated, but they are typically intertwined. For instance, doxastic justification is an attribute of beliefs and is deemed an epistemic property due to its truth-conduciveness, which in turn makes it

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<sup>1</sup> Pritchard, "Intellectual Virtues," p. 5515.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 5516.

epistemically valuable.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that, in this context, epistemic value refers solely to value in terms of episteme — an entity could be invaluable from certain perspectives while being epistemically insignificant, *vice versa*; and keeping this distinction in mind is important for our discussion. In short, veritism insists that truth is the fundamental epistemic good.

Earlier, we mentioned that the term “veritism” was selected over other alternatives, such as “epistemic value truth monism,” primarily due to its succinctness. However, the brevity of “veritism” does not imply a lack of historical implications, as is common with probably most philosophical terms. While it is employed here to convey the basic idea of regarding truth as the fundamental good in epistemology, it is crucial to recognize that Alvin Goldman’s usage of this term, carrying with it a significant theoretical load, is much more acknowledged in contemporary literature:

Veritistic epistemology (whether individual or social) is concerned with the production of knowledge, where knowledge is here understood in the ‘weak’ sense of true belief. More precisely, it is concerned with both knowledge and its contraries: error (false belief) and ignorance (the absence of true belief). The main question for veritistic epistemology is: Which practices have a comparatively favorable impact on knowledge as contrasted with error and ignorance? Individual veritistic epistemology asks this question for nonsocial practices; social veritistic epistemology asks it for social practices.<sup>2</sup>

In the provided citation and in other contexts where “veritism” is used in a more general sense, it is comparable to terms like “truth-based”<sup>3</sup> or “truth-linked.”<sup>4</sup> It can also be more loosely associated with the notion of accuracy.<sup>5</sup> In any case, the central idea is that epistemology or epistemic activities are primarily concerned with true beliefs (or something akin to it). However, this characterization remains somewhat ambiguous. As Goldman further delineates, his position aligns with a type of consequentialism concerning

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<sup>1</sup> Pritchard, "Defence of Veritism," p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Goldman, "The Unity of the Epistemic Virtues," in *Pathways to Knowledge: Private and Public*, ed. Alvin Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 52.

true beliefs, in which the merit or demerit of an epistemic action depends on the truth of the resulting belief: “The principal relation that epistemic virtues bear to the core epistemic value will be a teleological or consequentialist one. A process, trait, or action is an epistemic virtue to the extent that it tends to produce, generate, or promote (roughly) true belief.”<sup>1</sup> According to Pritchard, this is a common step that most veritism proponents naturally make, i.e., “to equate a desire for truth with a commitment to maximising true beliefs.”<sup>2</sup> Although this is perhaps considered by many philosophers as the conventional interpretation of veritism,<sup>3</sup> it is evident that this is not the only feasible version. In our pursuit of truth, our objectives go beyond merely generating true beliefs. Such a tendency is discernible not only in cases where the goal about true beliefs is construed obviously as a quantitative criterion, but also in more intricate cases where processes or virtues that reliably assist in engendering true beliefs are considered. As Linda Zagzebski has extensively argued on the matter:

In the sense most commonly discussed by reliabilists, truth conduciveness is a function of the *number* of true beliefs and the *proportion* of true to false beliefs generated by a process. There is another sense of truth conduciveness, however, which is important at the frontiers of knowledge and in areas, like philosophy, that generate very few true beliefs, no matter how they are formed. I suggest that we may legitimately call a trait or procedure truth conducive if it is a necessary condition for advancing knowledge in some area even though it generates very few true beliefs and even if a high percentage of the beliefs formed as the result of this trait or procedure are false. For example, the discovery of new reliable procedures may arise out of intellectual traits that lead a person to hit on falsehood many times before hitting on the truth. As long as these traits (in combination with other intellectual virtues) are self-correcting, they will eventually advance human knowledge, but many false beliefs may have to be discarded along the way. A person motivated to know would be motivated to act cognitively in a manner that is truth conducive in this sense, I would argue, in addition to acting in a way that is truth conducive in the more common sense.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Duncan Pritchard, "Veritism and the Goal of Inquiry," *Philosophia* 49, no. 4 (2021): p. 1349.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Catherine Z. Elgin, *True Enough* (The MIT Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Zagzebski, *Virtues of Mind*, pp. 181-82. It should be noted that Zagzebski does think our motivation for truth can be distinguished from our motivation for knowledge: “It is clear, then, that the following of truth-conducive procedures is not all that a knowledge-motivated person does, both because the motivation for truth leads to behavior that is not fully describable as the following of procedures, and because

While I retain some reservations about whether the type of feature that Zagzebski highlights can be deemed “truth-conducive,” her central premise is clear and compelling. When we express concern for truth, it is not simply a matter of truth quantities or how to consistently generate more truths than falsehoods. Instead, our interest in truth often connects to something more profound. We may allow ourselves to strive for truth, even at the risk of mistakes or inefficiency, and even if our efforts ultimately prove fruitless, we consider the quest not a deviation from the path towards truth and still inherently worthwhile because of its ultimate objective. That said, these two interpretations of veritism may not necessarily be mutually exclusive, and there is room for other potential interpretations. After all, the pursuit of generating true propositions and the quest for contact with reality may represent just two of the many distinct ways of becoming a good epistemic agent.<sup>1</sup> And, in fact, it is this part that we are primarily interested in — whether becoming a good epistemic agent, or more specifically, a wise person, involves aiming at truth (and, if so, what the nature of this relation might be). Therefore, apparently, it is not our main task here to determine the best interpretation of veritism, but rather to continue exploring the relation between the concept of wisdom and the concept of truth within the context of the epistemological tradition that places truth at the heart of epistemic good — a tradition that we could succinctly refer to as “veritism,” without the weight of further theoretical implications.

Drawing on veritism, the proposition I aim to present regarding the truth condition question is, broadly speaking, affirmative. That is, put crudely, a theory of wisdom should necessitate the candidate to hold true beliefs. However, this conclusion should prove to be more enlightening than it initially appears to be. By continuing to apply what we learned from the previous chapters to refine our understanding of both our epistemic discourse and the notion of wisdom, we will not only reach a somewhat unexpected conclusion, but also

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the motivation for knowledge includes more than the motivation for truth.” (ibid.) However, for the reason that I am going to mention in the next subsection, these two motivations can be understood in a unified manner.

<sup>1</sup> C.f., “There is a difference between the indisputable claim that knowledge puts the knower in cognitive contact with reality and the disputable claim that the object of knowledge is a true proposition. The former is compatible with being Isaiah Berlin’s hedgehog, but the latter is not. If there is any doubt about this, consider two epistemic values that involve cognitive contact with reality and that do not aim to link the mind with a true proposition. These values are understanding and wisdom.” (ibid., p. 45.)

reshape our understanding of veritism. Let us further explore this idea while considering potential complications that may arise from the generalized understanding of veritism.

### 1.2.2 Challenges to Veritism

A philosophical position seldom exists without facing any challenges, and veritism is no exception to this phenomenon. For a monistic stance about epistemic value, its opposition can generally be categorized into two types: those that remain monistic but attribute value to something different, or those that reject monism in favor of pluralism. As Goldman remarks: “This position has two types of rivals. The first is pluralism, which denies any thoroughgoing unity among all the epistemic virtues. The second type of rival is any theory that champions an alternative unifying theme, different from truth. Veritistic unitarianism must fend off challenges from both directions.”<sup>1</sup>

However, the emphasis on the pursuit of truth is evidently a prevailing theme in epistemological theorization. This prominence suggests that truth is commonly accepted as a reasonable aim of epistemic activities, thus allowing us to dismiss certain potential criticisms outright (recall that we have good reasons to rely on plausibly dominant features of our epistemic discourse). The type of critique that seems particularly unconvincing is the one that denies veritism’s central claim: truth is finally valuable in epistemology. It is difficult to imagine how we could conduct our cognitive activities without explicitly or implicitly putting efforts into discovering the truth. Rejecting truth as the fundamental epistemic good is an extreme stance, almost suggesting that our epistemic pursuits could be satisfied without taking truth into the account. Certainly, there are ongoing debates about what constitutes truth. And, on the other hand, truth is also not the sole focus of attention, since we rarely encounter ideal circumstances where truth is the only aspect that matters to us, or that we should be worried about. Moreover, even in purely epistemological discussions, not everyone agrees that truth is the only possible good for us to pursue.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, even if truth is not always the main focus or even the first element that

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<sup>1</sup> Goldman, "Unity of Epistemic Virtues," pp. 52-53.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Kvanvig and David, "Is Truth the Primary."



crosses our minds when discussing epistemic issues, it is a touchstone that we must return to in order to understand other epistemic notions. We talk about epistemic virtues, which are valuable for many reasons, but these virtues cannot be seriously entertained in epistemology if they are disconnected from the pursuit of truth. We care about justification, and the appropriate relationship between the information we possess and our own selves, regardless of whether that information proves true. But without considering truth, we lack a foundational baseline to measure the level of justification from the very beginning. In essence, being connected with facts is what truth means in general, making it counterintuitive to think of our epistemic activities as having nothing to do with such a connection. A desire for completing cognition, in its most basic sense, is about gathering information about the world. Therefore, actions intended to fulfill this desire are inherently driven by fact-finding, thus targeting truth.

That having been said, this preclusion does not confirm that truth is the only fundamental epistemic value at work. For instance, if intellectual virtues, justification, and other evaluated notions also play significant roles in our appropriate cognition, could they be as valuable as truth?<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the term “fundamental” is somewhat ambiguous, as it can be interpreted in various ways. Is something fundamental because it serves as the initial condition, without which other epistemic notions cannot exist? Or is it fundamental because it forms the basic support for the entirety of epistemology, meaning that other epistemic good depend on it? Could it be fundamental because it remains central to diverse epistemic notions, which cannot be adequately understood without considering truth? Or is it fundamental simply because it occupies the core of the web of epistemic concepts, with every epistemic notion directly or indirectly related to it, but without implying anything more substantial? Or perhaps it is fundamental because it represents the only common component or companion element within diverse epistemic notions, thus enabling epistemology to be unified and epistemic notions to be evaluated consistently? There may be even more interpretations, and while these different understandings may sometimes overlap, each could lead to unique implications. And these interpretations could help clarify in what sense the fundamentality of truth should be examined from both conceptual

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Baehr and Zagzebski, "Intellectually Virtuous Motives."

and axiological perspectives, as was mentioned in the last section. From the conceptual perspective, truth is seen as conceptually fundamental, as all epistemological concepts either stem from, are backed by, constituted by, systematized by, or can be understood in terms of the concept of truth. From the axiological perspective, truth is fundamental as it provides the essential framework for our evaluations, even though the interpretive lens may differ across various contexts. (Here, the choice of evaluation standpoint is a significant factor, to which we will return shortly.)

Except for the issues related to the interpretations of how truth is fundamental, there persists another question about the extent to which truth is fundamental. Indeed, even if truth is necessarily fundamental across all interpretations, this does not automatically rule out the potential fundamentality of other notions. One simple way this concern manifests is in recognizing that our pursuit of truth does not exist in isolation, but is often paired with a desire to avoid its antithesis, error. It could be plausibly argued that: “veritism really posits, not one, but two epistemic values: both true belief and error avoidance.”<sup>1</sup> The challenge here is that if we focus solely on evading errors without being epistemically courageous enough to risk potentially false beliefs, we may maintain true beliefs, but such a strategy for conducting our cognitive activities seems unsatisfactory. Of course, there are straightforward ways to reconcile these two pursuits. Goldman, for instance, proposes that “[i]n general, a higher degree of belief in a truth counts as more veritistically valuable than a lower degree of belief in that truth”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, suspending judgment should be considered as inferior to having true beliefs (and superior to holding false beliefs). The problem, however, is that why we should look at the issue from this standpoint from the outset — that is, why should it be “veristically” valuable in the first place? Could we not consider an alternate ordering where withholding judgment is prioritized over the risk of error? While it is intuitive that giving accurate information is better than giving no information (which in turn is better than spreading misinformation), it is also plausible that this hierarchy could be reversed, particularly in situations demanding caution. In such scenarios, the value of truth is not that it is intrinsically the most important, but that it

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<sup>1</sup> Goldman, "Unity of Epistemic Virtues," pp. 57-58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 58. (Concluded from Goldman, *Knowledge in Social World*, pp. 88-89.)

prevents error more effectively than abstaining from making judgment, rendering truth not apparently valued for its own sake.<sup>1</sup>

There are two main ways to understand the potential problem of truth's variable fundamentality, though neither of them seems to be particularly threatening to veritism from our perspective. The first perspective frames this issue primarily as a question of whether truth is the only fundamental epistemic value. The second perspective delves into the subtler issue of relativity — that is, the relative fundamentality of different values in different contexts. Regardless of what additional epistemic good is proposed as fundamentally epistemically valuable, the crux of the problem remains that these values could be either universally fundamental, holding equal weight under all circumstances, or contextually fundamental, with their significance changing based on the specific context, while all still being fundamentally important in a broader or more general sense. A position like epistemic value pluralism might initially be understood in light of the first interpretation, positing that other epistemic good, such as justification, understanding, or other intellectual virtues, could hold an equally fundamental epistemic value as truth.<sup>2</sup> However, these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive; for instance, the case of simultaneously pursuing truth and avoiding error, as mentioned earlier, may be accommodated by the first interpretation. Yet, it may align more closely with the latter due to some subtle consideration about the immediacy or directness when it comes to referring to the epistemic good in question. One may argue, just because one concept springs to mind before another, it does not necessarily mean that this concept precedes the other in all ordering. Furthermore, the fact that one element becomes more relevant in specific circumstances does not necessarily alter the ranking regarding its inherent fundamentality. For instance, both a justice-ensuring procedure and the concept of justice itself may be deemed critical, but in many situations, the procedure is often the more immediately referenced one and is considered more crucial to uphold than directly serving justice.

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<sup>1</sup> This may even potentially lead to a loss of its fundamental status among epistemic notions. We will see a similar line of reasoning shortly.

<sup>2</sup> Recall the example of taking understanding as another fundamental epistemic value. (Swinburne, *Providence*.)

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we regard the procedure as the fundamental good over justice in such scenarios. Goldman's comment on this point is worth citing:

It is by no means clear that a derivative value could not assume some sort of priority over a more fundamental value. Suppose that a state with fundamental value is, for the most part, only *reachable, realizable, or accessible* to human agents via some action or state with derivative value. Moreover, the action or state with derivative value is more directly subject to "guidance" than the state with fundamental value. Then we might place greater weight on achieving or "performing" the more accessible action with merely derivative value. We might even make such an action obligatory. This deontic force or obligatoriness would not necessarily indicate a greater *value* for the accessible action or state. It's just that we can't expect people to achieve the fundamentally valued state but we can expect them to take the best route in its direction. So we may positively *require* agents to take that route without also requiring them to achieve the more fundamental value. This would make it appear as if the required action or state is more important or weighty, and hence not merely derivative. But such an appearance would be deceptive.<sup>1</sup>

A possible worry here, however, is that when we simply compare epistemic notions like seeking truth and avoiding error, or more distinctively, like pursuing truth versus emulating intellectual virtues, without considering their deeper relationships, it can be difficult to find a mutual basis to define one in terms of the other. Therefore, we may naturally lean towards considering these pairs of epistemic pursuits in isolation. Indeed, we often bypass extensive thought on such issues due to their apparent triviality. If we insist on asking about whether or not more than one single epistemic good can be fundamental at the same level, one may conversely question why the fundamentality of truth is important in the first place — why should we even debate whether truth is the sole fundamental epistemic good from the outset? At the end of the day, it seems that philosophers are advocating for the essential status of truth or some other epistemic notions as if they were predestined to be the "fundamental" epistemic good. Consequently, it might be tempting to argue for these positions as if they were factual — that is, as if there were epistemic facts that we could discover and conclude which epistemic good is fundamental. Nonetheless, the lessons we have learned from the last chapter indicate that this is not a promising route. Instead, we should be more concerned with what exists in our epistemic discourse and how we can develop on the existing basis. Thus, our focus should be on whether traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Goldman, "Unity of Epistemic Virtues," p. 62.

veritism remains tenable in light of the current developments in epistemology. If it proves viable, its position as the fundamental epistemic value for all other notions offers a compelling basis for further epistemological theorization. If it does not, we must explore ways to revise, expand, or evolve this established stance. An additional comforting element is that our approach does not exclude the possibility that truth may coexist with other forms of epistemic value as a fundamental construct. I will later argue that we already have substantial grounds for advocating veritism, starting from a commonly accepted premise — our epistemic desires. That said, for our current purposes, there is no need to linger on this issue, as our primary goal is to determine whether we should expect wisdom to correlate with holding true beliefs. Thus, as long as we acknowledge the fundamental importance of truth, the potential pluralism of epistemic value should not significantly impact our project.<sup>1</sup>

However, some readers may have noticed that, if the pursuit of truth and the avoidance of error are both rooted in our initial considerations of truth, there seems to be a repetition in mentioning truth, which subtly raises a new question: Is the truth we are going after still the same as the one we look for from the start? Is the act of avoiding error merely a different approach to seeking truth? If so, why is it distinguished from the simple act of truth-seeking? This disparity in our conceptions of truth becomes more pronounced when “mere truth” is differentiated from “special truth.” The value of truth in various domains can differ, and in such cases, Goldman might respond: “Let us just say that the core epistemic value is a high degree of truth-possession on *topics of interest*.” Hence, the broad pursuit of truth is maintained, albeit specified according to different epistemic goals across various fields. But since the significance of truth can vary across all domains, some truths

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that whether veritism, understood as epistemic value truth monism, is the received view is debatable. Pritchard observes that “although I grant that it was once an epistemological orthodoxy, I don’t think it retains that status any more. Indeed, I would maintain that the tide has turned decisively against veritism in recent years (though, I would suggest, for all the wrong reasons). These days epistemological orthodoxy sides with the epistemic value pluralist, or at least with epistemic value monism of a different kind (such as an epistemic value *knowledge* monism).” (Pritchard, “Veritism and Goal of Inquiry.”) However, this point will not be further pursued. As I will argue in a moment, the primary alternative theories, given that they all recognize the fundamentality of truth or include it as a component, do not significantly impact our current discussion.

may sometimes be deemed inferior to others.<sup>1</sup> Then should we assert that we pursue truth, but not all truth?

The concern behind this question is: Are we truly concerned with every single piece of truth? Does the outcome of counting leaves in a yard really intrigue us? Can we genuinely regard the truth about the number of leaves in a yard as valuable as uncovering the ultimate truth of the universe? Since both the number of leaves and the secret of the universe are truths, if it is truth simpliciter that we are after, it follows that there is nothing stopping us from judging both of them fundamental to the same degree. But this does not sound right, and thus leads to what Pritchard regards as the most prevailing challenge against veritism — the trivial truths objection.<sup>2</sup> According to this type of objection, veritism can lead to a conclusion that suggests there is no differentiation in the epistemological value between various true propositions. Yet, it seems counterintuitive for us to equate the epistemic value of knowing the number of leaves in a yard with the significance of discovering the ultimate truth of the universe. Therefore, it appears that there must be a factor as fundamental as truth (or even more fundamental than truth, in the eyes of the critics) that enables us to further discern the epistemic value of different truths.

Pritchard's response to this critique is grounded in the idea that the objection is mistakenly taking propositions as the relevant unit for making epistemic assessment.<sup>3</sup> Instead, he proposes that it is the intellectually virtuous inquirer and their goal that should be considered the primary notion in understanding the nature of the fundamental epistemic good.<sup>4</sup> We will discuss this solution further in the next subsection, but at least, at first glance, Pritchard's reasoning from the perspective of virtuous inquirers seems promising. Even though it is up for debate whether an inherent attribute can qualify as a virtue, given that it is beyond our control, the role of truth as the starting point of our epistemic processes is widely recognized — our inherent curiosity triggers our inquiry, which is initially an

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<sup>1</sup> For example, only significant truth matters, as argued in Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993); Philip Kitcher, *The Advancement of Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Pritchard, "Defence of Veritism," p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> "Intellectual Virtues," p. 5521.

<sup>4</sup> "Defence of Veritism," p. 33.

epistemic process aimed at seeking truth. This position does not only make truth fundamental in some senses mentioned above, but also, as outlined in the previous chapter, aligns with our preliminary assumptions of what can satisfy our epistemic desires. As virtuous inquirers are typically viewed as idealized versions of ordinary epistemic agents, truth can reasonably persist in its role as a guiding objective in the idealized epistemic journey, thereby solidifying its status as a fundamental good within the realm of epistemology.

A problem, however, arises when we scrutinize the function of truth within this context. Upon closer inspection, it becomes less certain how the status of truth is so firmly established. As we delve into specifics, the pursuit of truth may evolve beyond the mere acquisition of facts, expanding to include knowledge, understanding, wisdom, or even practical benefits. Consequently, not all of our ensuing epistemic processes may regard truth as the only ultimate desideratum, even when they are considered to be a part of the idealized epistemic journey conducted by the virtuous inquirers. Thus, truth may not always be treated as the sole, fundamental epistemic good. The problem manifests itself in two aspects:

First, our desire for truth serves a dual role: it both initiates our epistemic activities and sets the initial aim for us. However, that an inquiry is launched by the desire for truth does not guarantee that truth, or solely truth, remains our constant objective. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, we may understandably start our epistemic dialogues seeking epistemic facts, and our inability to locate such facts does not invalidate our desire for truth, nor does it render the truth any less desirable. Yet, it does challenge the insistence that uncovering epistemic fact should be our only aim in all epistemological research. In fact, whether we examine the course of human cognition, or smaller, more specific projects of inquiry, our inherent curiosity may plausibly initiate our epistemic pursuits. Nevertheless, as fundamental in this sense as it may be, this starting point likely only constitutes a minimal part of the whole epistemic process (both actually and conceptually), and it does not predetermine our entire epistemic journey or the entirety of our possible objectives.

At this point, it is important to note that Pritchard's approach to our desire for truth seems somewhat peculiar — he seems to argue that truth is what we desire and always

desire in all epistemic processes, rather than claiming that we do desire truth, and the latter then becomes the object of our epistemic endeavors. This subtle difference becomes clear when he rejects the development of our desires from simply truth to more qualified truth (interesting truths in this case): “Either the notion of an interesting truth is understood as some further epistemic good, independent of truth, in which case one is not then defending veritism, but rather advancing a form of epistemic value pluralism instead. Or else the notion of an interesting truth is understood along non-epistemic lines, such as in terms of practical value.”<sup>1</sup> This claim raises questions on several fronts: It is puzzling as to why a further epistemic good developed from our desire for truth is considered “independent” of truth; why a specific form of truth is seen as non-epistemic; and, perhaps most perplexing, why by refining or limiting our pursuit of truth, we would contravene veritism’s central tenet. If it is proposed that veritism should be viewed as reflective of the development of virtuous inquirers’ epistemic activities, then even if they later shift their focus to some epistemic good other than truth, it is still such epistemic good that should be considered most fundamental. Furthermore, as long as truth is sought alongside the newly focused epistemic good, the thesis that truth is fundamental is still somewhat maintained. That is to say, veritism, interpreted through the lens of virtuous inquirers, does not necessarily rule out a pluralistic or even non-standardly epistemic understanding.

In our line of thought, this result should not be too surprising or difficult to accept. If we cannot identify the epistemic fact that “truth is the fundamental epistemic good,” then it appears not only challenging but also futile to prevent different interpretations of fundamentality and the proposal of individual conceptions of the value system of epistemology. All we can confirm is that, given our inherent desire for truth, we already possess a form of fundamental epistemic good — This innate quest for truth is an inherent part of our cognition, laying the groundwork for our understanding and knowledge. And observing the status of truth from this viewpoint reveals that it is not the fundamental nature of truth that is most crucial, but rather the way our epistemic pursuits are initiated, and our epistemic endeavors are driven that matter when it comes to assigning the status of truth. Therefore, allowing a certain good other than truth to occupy a central place in

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<sup>1</sup> "Veritism and Goal of Inquiry," p. 1351, fn. 10.



epistemology does not constitute a problem in itself, as it would not be inherently problematic that our epistemic efforts are reasonably directed towards another objective. It follows that, for veritism to still hold water in our train of thought, the emphasis should not be on defending the claim that truth is objectively ultimately epistemically valuable, but rather on whether its initial appeal can persist as our exploration broadens — underpinning this shift in focus is an important distinction between two perspectives of viewing this issue.

The second facet of the problem, on the other hand, might appear less obvious. That is, a doubt as to Pritchard's reluctance to deny that if we pursue truth, we pursue all truth. On the surface, the problem still pertains to why limiting our epistemic pursuit from all truth to a select subset of truths is perceived as a movement towards pluralism, or a departure from a purely epistemological stance, rather than a refinement of the original version of truth monism. However, at its core, it is an uncertainty of whether Pritchard's account could adequately address the deeper concerns behind the trivial truths objection — While Pritchard seems to be able to vindicate veritism by explaining why truth can be plausibly regarded as the fundamental epistemic good, his argument is not explaining away some more profound worries behind the objection: whether our desire for truth truly implies an aim for all truth; whether all truths hold the same degree of importance and warrant equal attention; whether various sorts of truths — some clearly less significant than others — can be sufficiently differentiated... Turning to the viewpoint of virtuous inquirers does not instantly resolve these concerns, and as our investigation progresses in the next subsection, it may turn out that Pritchard's own assertions on these issues are inconsistent. This is not to suggest that Pritchard's approach is outright unsuccessful. Quite the contrary, it is nonetheless enlightening and is potentially well-equipped to address these worries. The perceived problem lies not within the approach itself, but rather in how the narrative built around it should evolve. As our exploration unfolds, it will be proposed that the key is to switch the perspective of observing the issues in the way we just mentioned — that is, to view them more thoroughly from the perspective of the idealized epistemic agents. More interestingly, we will then see how our consideration of the relation between wisdom and truth, our line of thought of epistemic expressivism, and the story of virtuous inquirers in support of veritism (alongside these two problematic aspects that we have preliminarily identified in Pritchard's response), all intersect. And this intersection does more than

simply synthesizing the strengths and discarding the weaknesses among these thoughts; it also sheds light to a fresh path towards theorizing wisdom.

### 1.3 Wisdom or Truth

According to Goldman, veritism maintains that “the unity of epistemic virtues in which the cardinal value, or underlying motif, is something like true, or accurate, belief.”<sup>1</sup> When compared to this assertion, Pritchard’s emphasis that truth is the fundamental epistemic good seems like a mere reiteration. In fact, if veritism is only interpreted in this way, the introduction of it appears to be simply a rebranding of a traditional point of view, for the pursuit of truth as a fundamental epistemic mission is a classic characterization that can be traced back to Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the soul is divided into two parts: the irrational and the rational (with the latter further divided into the scientific/theoretical part and the calculative/practical part, by which we contemplate invariable and variable things respectively<sup>2</sup>). Corresponding to this rational part of soul are the intellectual virtues. Aristotle asserts, “[t]he excellence of a thing is relative to its proper function,” and intellectual virtues are thus related to the function or the end of the soul’s rational part, of which “the good and the bad state are truth and falsity (for this is the function of everything intellectual).”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the best state of the rational part of the soul involves fulfilling its function of arriving at the truths rather than their opposites (although for the variable part, there are only variable truths to discern, and it needs to be additionally guided by suitable desires).

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<sup>1</sup> Goldman, "Unity of Epistemic Virtues," p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> The choice of terminology (or the translation) here is debatable, especially considering that the pragmatic turn that we are going to discuss in the second section of this chapter will concern the distinction between theoretical/practical/productive (*theoria/praxis/poiesis*). However, this will not be further addressed here, as it could unnecessarily complicate the issue at hand.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard Mckeon (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 1139a1-30. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, virtues are characterized in two ways: One is that “virtues are praiseworthy states of character (*NE II*),” and the other is a more teleological conception of virtues related to “any X with a function or end – people, eyes, knives,” including intellectual virtues. (H. Battaly, "Intellectual Virtues," in *Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. S. van Hooft (London: Acumen, 2014), p. 178.)

For our current purposes, the complexity that is important to note in Aristotle's account of intellectual virtues arises from the separation he makes between the scientific/theoretical part of the soul and desires. This separation may sound somewhat unnatural to modern ears, and even appears contradictory to the notion of "love for the truth." It stems from Aristotle's belief that intellect does not move anything,<sup>1</sup> which may seem counterintuitive today, as when we utilize our intellect, we are at least moving our brains. The problem aggravates when more complicated issues, say, mathematical conundrums, are taken into consideration: Even though they are somewhat purely theoretical, they would still require more sophisticatedly internal actions to put up hypotheses, calculation, and examination, etc.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Aristotle's exclusion of desires from intellect is questionable. However, what is more important here is that even if we accept Aristotle's distinction, the problem that Pritchard's introduction of virtuous inquirers remains, namely, whether it is truth or virtuously desired epistemic goals that should come first in order. Let us commence our exploration by looking into how the concept of virtuous inquirers is intended to address the challenges against veritism.

### 1.3.1 Truth as the End of Virtuous Inquiry

The previous subsection made reference to Pritchard's proposal to understand the fundamental epistemic good from the perspective of intellectually virtuous inquirers, who/which is considered the primary notion in epistemic evaluation. But what does this entail? In essence, what Pritchard considers as intellectual virtues are some reliable cognitive capacities that are akin to cognitive skills. However, to cultivate and maintain such traits, epistemic agents must actively imitate and emulate those who already embody these virtues, and continue to reflect and refine themselves after the acquisition. Intellectual virtues are not only practically helpful, but also a constitutive component of human flourishing, and thus share the final value of living well. Epistemic agents equipped with intellectual virtues would possess a unique kind of motivational states, namely, a love for

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," 1139a35-36.

<sup>2</sup> Battaly, "Intellectual Virtues," p. 180.

the truth<sup>1</sup> or a veritic desire,<sup>2</sup> which drives them to pursue and maintain these virtues. And since the epistemic agents are motivated in this manner, when they exhibit these intellectual virtues, they are naturally inclined to discover truth. Their goals, in other words, the goals of virtuous inquiry, are also naturally fixed on the truth. As a result, truth becomes the fundamental epistemic good.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, since the quest for truth for these virtuous epistemic agents involves grasping the nature of various things,<sup>4</sup> they will not be simply striving to maximize the number of their true beliefs, nor will they treat all truths equally.<sup>5</sup> Pritchard argues that this approach allows veritism to counter the objection from trivial truths, and uphold the fundamental status of truth in epistemology.

Should Pritchard's argument successfully vindicate the tradition of veritism, then it follows that the very questioning of the truth condition of wisdom is inherently flawed — that is, it should not have been posed in the first place. This is for two reasons: On the one hand, since all concepts must intersect with truth to be considered epistemic, wisdom cannot exist as an epistemic concept in isolation from truth.<sup>6</sup> We must, therefore, retain some elements of truth in our conception of wisdom to ensure that it remains epistemologically relevant. On the other hand, however, merely incorporating truth into our concept of wisdom is insufficient. The theorization of concepts does not have to explicitly mention their connection with truth to make them epistemic, e.g., articulating a truth condition, since there are numerous epistemic concepts that are not strongly or obviously connected to the concept of truth. For example, the concept of belief is typically differentiated from the concept of true belief, but they are both readily acknowledged as epistemic concepts. We can easily understand why the concept of belief is still implicitly related to truth, as true beliefs are taken for granted to be the paradigm for belief-forming.

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<sup>1</sup> Pritchard, "Defence of Veritism," pp. 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> "Veritic Desire," *HUMANA. MENTE Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14, no. 39 (2021): p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> "Intellectual Virtues," pp. 5523-24.

<sup>4</sup> "Defence of Veritism," p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> "Intellectual Virtues," p. 5524.

<sup>6</sup> This is, of course, based on the assumption that wisdom can be regarded as an epistemic concept, which this dissertation is taking for granted.

Nevertheless, it is important to note here that true beliefs are also considered superior to non-true beliefs. That is to say, while the absence of explicit mention of truth does not undermine the concept's epistemic status, it becomes significant when we proceed to epistemic evaluation. When we compare knowledge and justified beliefs, we tend to place higher value on knowledge, or more specifically, assign a more positive epistemic standing to knowledge. And the inclusion of truth as part of the concept of knowledge makes a considerable difference in this regard, even though truth is not the only contributing factor. In other words, knowledge often gains preferential status over justified beliefs largely because it explicitly requires truth, which is the fundamental epistemic good. This principle of status ranking is also applicable to wisdom. Given philosophers' tendency to regard wisdom as the highest,<sup>1</sup> or the most prized epistemic good,<sup>2</sup> it is then extremely difficult to conceive wisdom without such a vital component, and without the endorsement of the corresponding ultimate epistemic value derived from truth. Therefore, if veritism is accurate, it is supposed to be an unquestioned assumption that our answer to whether a theory of wisdom should necessitate wise people to hold true beliefs would always be affirmative. Posing such a question suggests the potential for an opposing answer, and is thus, from the outset, implausible in light of the premises of veritism.

To directly argue about the correctness of assuming a positive answer to the truth condition question regarding wisdom seems undesirable, since it leads us back into the pursuit of epistemic facts. What is apparently more interesting is that we already have a range of negative responses to this very question that contradicts the veritist expected result. Of course, the mere existence of unsolved debates does not automatically cast doubt on what is under discussion, for it is common to have continued yet pointless debates over topics that have clear answers. What is really intriguing here is that some of these responses conflicting with the expectations of veritism do seem reasonable, and it is this that makes the veritist anticipation of a positive answer becomes questionable. In plainer words, since

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne D. Riggs, "Understanding 'Virtue' and the Virtue of Understanding," in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> Shane Ryan, "Wisdom, not Veritism," *Epistemology & Philosophy of Science* 58, no. 4 (2021): p. 60.

the plausibility of veritism should ensure that wisdom necessarily incorporates truth, the feasibility of a negative answer to the truth condition question about wisdom poses a potential threat to the veritist thesis regarding the fundamental role of truth as an epistemic good.

Bringing our discussion of the truth condition question regarding wisdom does not only introduce this kind of external challenge to veritism, but also an internal one. The central thesis of veritism, to reiterate, is that truth is the fundamental good of all our epistemic activities, and it amounts to that truth is both conceptually and axiologically fundamental in epistemic assessment. The conceptual link between truth and other epistemic notions is fairly straightforward to comprehend (whether or not from the perspective of our natural preference for truth), but grasping the issue of epistemic value proves to be notoriously difficult. Positing to be a member of epistemic value monism is already difficult, as there stands both the radical rival of skepticism about epistemic value against the underlying program, and the looming threat from epistemic value pluralism. Fortunately, they do not appear to be particularly challenging for us, as skepticism is not an attractive stance as long as we recognize that there remains some sense in talking about value “from a purely epistemologically perspective;” and pluralism, as previously mentioned, is not very damaging given our current purposes. What should be noted, however, is that as discussed in Subsection 1.2, there are various ways to interpret the fundamentality of truth. Perhaps the least contentious interpretation among them is the one that centers on our inborn curiosity, which drives us to seek more truth to satisfy our epistemic desires. On the surface, Pritchard’s line of reasoning appears to align with such a “natural” development. Nevertheless, a worry arises when we take into account the gap between the inborn desire for truth and the virtuous pursuit of truth. As virtue responsibilists rightly observe, “we are not hard-wired to care appropriately about truth. We may innately care about truth too little, or too much, and must learn to care appropriately.”<sup>1</sup>

It can be easily discerned that a virtuous inquirer’s love for the truth must be acquired through reflection, whereas our natural desire for truth can be unexamined and

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<sup>1</sup> Battaly, "Intellectual Virtues," p. 183.

instinctual. That said, the core issue here is not about their distinction. Rather, the crux of the matter lies in that while our curiosity might instigate the entire process of our epistemic activities and is, therefore, fundamental in that sense, it cannot serve as a warrant for us to take truth as the ultimate epistemic objective that we *should* pursue. Put differently, that Pritchard's argument for veritism shares similarities in structure with a naturalistic understanding of truth as the primary epistemic aim is not helping him clarify why virtuous inquirers *should* place truth as their final goal. And, in fact, as Pritchard himself concedes, even though truth appears as the most natural objective for inquiry guided by intellectual virtues, there exist other possible options.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the challenge that veritism currently faces is a problem from within: An argument for veritism built upon the desire for truth is not as secure as expected. For our present purposes, the consequence is twofold: For one, the possession of true beliefs may not necessarily be a requisite condition for being wise in some contexts. And for the other, more interestingly, wisdom might replace truth as the cornerstone of our epistemic enterprise — given that wisdom is often deemed the highest or the most valued epistemic virtue, it is fairly reasonable for us to say that the motivation or the driving force for virtuous inquirers should be the attainment of wisdom. After all, when placed side by side, the quest for wisdom appears to be compellingly loftier than a mere love for truth.<sup>2</sup> And this is the viewpoint that Shane Ryan advances: In fact, the ideal epistemic agents in Pritchard's story should not only aim at truth, but should also regard wisdom as the pinnacle of their epistemic journey, and strive for acquiring this epistemic good throughout their life.<sup>3</sup>

A crucial point to be emphasized here is that there seems to be no inherent contradiction in professing a desire for both truth and wisdom. Shane Ryan does not deny that our inquiry is initiated and guided by a pursuit of truth. Instead, his argument can be seen as an extension of Pritchard's idea: The veritist claim essentially asserts that it is the motivational state of intellectually virtuous inquirers that determines what is the most

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<sup>1</sup> Pritchard, "Intellectual Virtues," p. 5524.

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, a comparison between the motivation for truth and the motivation for knowledge may appear less compelling. (Zagzebski, *Virtues of Mind*, p. 181.)

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, not Veritism," p. 65.

fundamental epistemic good, and Shane Ryan contends that “while it is plausible that the intellectually virtuous agent loves the truth, it seems implausible that their love stops there. As an intellectually virtuous agent they surely love wisdom too.”<sup>1</sup> This means that under ideal conditions, epistemic agents would not merely seek to discover the truth, but would pursue a further epistemic objective such as wisdom, which is usually considered as the grandest epistemic goal. Therefore, it is wisdom, rather than mere truth that is supposed to be regarded as the fundamental epistemic good.

One advantage of shifting our focus from truth to wisdom is that it prepares us to better handle challenges like the trivial truths objection. As outlined in the first chapter and revisited in Subsection 1.1 of this chapter, once the basic requirements for epistemic character-traits and capacities are met, wisdom theorists tend to establish specialized requirements for epistemic agents’ beliefs. For instance, a theory of wisdom might state that wisdom exists only in specific domains or within a limited scope (e.g., there are theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom, managerial wisdom, etc., but there is no mathematical wisdom, for wisdom only deals with uncertain things<sup>2</sup>), or that only beliefs concerned with certain topics contribute to or constitute wisdom (e.g., wise beliefs must pertain to human flourishing/*eudaimonia*<sup>3</sup>). Therefore, only certain truths matter as far as wisdom is concerned, and thus not all true beliefs should be considered equally significant. This does not mean we cannot evaluate true beliefs that are not directly related to wisdom. Shane Ryan’s point of view on this is perhaps preliminary but useful. He proposes that truth and wisdom can have three kinds of relations: Truths can be directly valuable to wisdom, instrumentally valuable to wisdom, or not relevantly valuable to wisdom.<sup>4</sup> The distinctions are easy to understand: Beliefs that a credible theory of wisdom should include as necessary conditions are directly valuable; beliefs that are not directly required by wisdom theories but can lead to or promote those beliefs that are required are instrumentally valuable; and beliefs that belong to neither of these categories are not

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Grimm, "Wisdom."

<sup>3</sup> Yu, "Three Kinds of Wisdom."

<sup>4</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, not Veritism," p. 66.



relevant when discussing wisdom. It is worth noting that even in the third scenario, wisdom can provide us with guidance on how to evaluate those non-relevant beliefs from an epistemological standpoint, because wise people are first good epistemic agents that are expected to form their beliefs appropriately in any given domain. As a result, we can make meaningful epistemic assessments for all epistemic outcomes in light of the pursuit of wisdom, whether they are strongly tied to wisdom or not.

Provided that Shane Ryan's argument is valid, it gives us an explanation of the phenomenon that there are conflicting answers towards the truth condition question about wisdom. On the one hand, when our epistemic endeavors aim at wisdom rather than truth, the veritist premise that only allows for affirmative answers will no longer confine our theorization. Since we are not obliged to assume that all wise beliefs must be true, we can consider alternatives that may contradict this condition. On the other hand, once wisdom is acknowledged as where the final epistemic value resides, its esteemed status as an epistemic good becomes independent of the support from truth and stands on its own. This makes it possible to conceive wisdom as the highest or the most prized epistemic good without explicit or even implicit reference to truth. Both of these two implications can plausibly account for the conflicting responses on the table and thereby address the external challenge brought by our discussions of wisdom.

However, in the absence of epistemic facts to rely on, there seems to be no hard evidence to judge whether this explanation is indeed the correct one. While it appears plausible, so too does the traditional position of veritism. There does not seem to be an obvious reason for us to favor the approach that treats wisdom as the fundamental epistemic good instead of truth. Indeed, the only compelling element for preferring wisdom over truth mentioned above lies in its potential to solve the most prevalent challenge against veritism, i.e., the trivial truths objection. Nevertheless, veritists themselves have already achieved this desirable result without having to give up their thesis that truth is the fundamental epistemic good, as long as truth is considered the ultimate epistemic goal for virtuous inquirers. If this is viewed as a theoretical stalemate, from a practical perspective — especially drawing on the line of thought developed in the last chapter — there seem to be even fewer reasons to adopt the narrative that centers around wisdom. After all, there seems to be no need to introduce a new approach if the received one is not severely flawed or

compromised. Consequently, while Shane Ryan's proposal presents a plausible alternative, there needs to be a more significant theoretical advantage to persuade the reader to be convinced that wisdom, *instead of* truth, is the fundamental epistemic good. Fortunately, there is still room for us to further develop Shane Ryan's reasoning. In the next sub-subsection, we will present three possible developments of his argument to examine if wisdom can be justified to replace the fundamental role of truth in epistemology. Among them, as will be argued, the third one appears to be promising, and may shed new light on both our issue at hand and the theorization of wisdom.

### 1.3.2 Wisdom as the End of Virtuous Inquiry

Several arguments could be made about why wisdom should be more fundamental than truth in epistemology, and thereby take the place of the latter as the fundamental epistemic good. Given space constraints, in this sub-subsection, we will consider three argumentative strategies against orthodox veritism that connect with our previous and forthcoming discussions. Let us begin with a noticeable approach based on an extension of the veritist story.

#### **(1) Inquiry culminates in wisdom**

As mentioned earlier, Shane Ryan's argument, especially his formulation like "while it is plausible that the intellectually virtuous agent loves the truth, it seems implausible that their love stops there" could be interpreted as suggesting that virtuous inquirers' love for truth does not stop at mere truth as veritists propose, but extends further to wisdom. In other words, it is forming wisdom, rather than acquiring truth, that virtuous inquiry ultimately aims at, and wisdom, instead of truth, should thus be regarded as the fundamental epistemic good. This interpretation provides a reasonable expansion of veritism's own narrative, and thus pose a challenge from within. However, in a specific inquiry, finding the truth is indeed the immediate goal, and aspiring for wisdom might seem unusual. Therefore, to make the counterargument more plausible, one could emphasize that we are not discussing ordinary, everyday inquiries, but rather long-term inquiry that unfolds over a lifetime. From this perspective, it becomes more compelling that our inquiry should not end at discovering specific truths, but should extend further to the attainment of

wisdom. Nevertheless, even though the formation of wisdom may seem a more plausible and desirable outcome in the context of lifelong inquiry, does this necessarily mean that wisdom occupies the most fundamental position in epistemology?

At first sight, there seems to be no obvious flaw in linking these two conclusions. However, veritists are no strangers to this kind of counterargument, as inquiry is not typically expected to end with the acquisition of mere true beliefs, but with a more advanced epistemic status, such as knowledge or understanding. Consequently, concerns have long been raised about whether knowledge, understanding, or some other options should be seen as the fundamental epistemic good. In response, Pritchard has effectively addressed these worries with two key points. First, extending beyond true beliefs to knowledge or understanding does not by itself make any distinction between different true propositions in terms of epistemic value. Thus, ascribing the fundamental status to knowledge or understanding cannot help us solve the trivial truths objection. By contrast, veritism, following Pritchard's narrative of the virtuous inquirer, has the capacity to resolve this challenge. Second, even though we usually anticipate that our epistemic journey culminates in the attainment of knowledge or understanding, this does not undermine the crucial role that truth plays in directing their formation. After all, even when knowledge or understanding is our apparent goal, the underlying inclination to find the truth remains unchanged — asserting that we aim to know or understand something is essentially a more sophisticated expression of our desire to discern the truth. Such inquiry in question could be understood as a process that concludes with an examination of its result, but this does not imply that the final step is its ultimate objective. Take, for example, a chef, whose culinary process typically ends with tasting her prepared dish. It would be evidently nonsensical to suggest that tasting the dish is her initial goal, for, at the end of the day, the entire process is aimed at creating delicious food. The step of trying the dish, while appearing last in the sequence, serves only the purpose of ensuring that the final result aligns with her initial objective of preparing good food. Similarly, the step of forming knowledge or understanding serves to verify the desired truth is secured. Therefore, to view the relation between truth and knowledge/understanding in reverse would be to miss the

mark — since truth is still the driving force beneath our pursuit of knowledge and understanding, its status remains more fundamental than them.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the situation of knowledge or understanding, as stated before, taking wisdom as the ultimate epistemic goal can indeed handle the trivial truths objection, and our first argumentative strategy is thus immune to Pritchard's first point of critique. However, his second point remains to be applicable. As long as the essence of the discussion lies not in which epistemic good appears last, but which is more fundamental, it is difficult to refute that our yearning for truth is what motivates us to initiate our epistemic process (consciously or unconsciously). And it follows that satisfying such a desire is, at least one of, the core task(s) that guide(s) the entire epistemic journey. If we interpret the fundamentality of truth in epistemology in this light, it stands to reason that the epistemic status or concepts built on truth are subsequent developments arising from this primary pursuit. Regarding knowledge and understanding, it is clear that they encapsulate truth more effectively, as they stabilize the relationship between the fact and us, ensuring a more reliable capture of truth. The relation between truth and wisdom might be less apparent, but it is still conceivable that wisdom can, say, entrench the truth into the possessor's actions and behaviors, and thereby integrate epistemic agents and their possession of truth. In any case, so long as we acknowledge the leading role that truth plays in our cognitive processes, it is difficult to argue that wisdom is more fundamental than truth from the perspective that inquiry should culminate in attaining wisdom rather than mere true beliefs.

## **(2) Wisdom does not necessitate true belief**

The key reason that the previous argumentative strategy falls short seems to be grounded in the guiding role that truth plays in our epistemic process. If that is the case, we might try challenging truth's fundamental status in epistemology by questioning this function. Although it could be difficult to refute the role of truth as the initial motivator for our epistemic journey, a potential alternative route can be found in the negative answers to the truth condition question regarding wisdom. That is, we might consider wisdom as the highest epistemic good, which is supposed to be dependent on support from the

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<sup>1</sup> Pritchard, "Veritic Desire," pp. 6-8.

fundamental epistemic good, while simultaneously rejecting that a theory of wisdom should necessitate truth as a component. If this way of theorization turns out to be feasible, it would suggest that truth might not be as fundamental or indispensable as veritists assume. Arguing from this perspective does not make any assertion about truth's initiating function and is thus safe from relevant objections. As for why truth becomes less fundamental when it comes to the conception of wisdom, we could, for example, propose that even though our inquiry begins with a desire for truth, we might uncover something that transcends the guidance of truth and is relatively independent of truth as a more fundamental pursuit. In essence, the second strategy challenges truth's fundamental status by showing that an epistemic standing, which is expected to be endorsed by the fundamental epistemic good, does not necessitate truth. Of course, this does not automatically demonstrate how wisdom takes the place of truth in epistemology. However, I would argue that even the first step already encounters significant difficulties.

Readers might recognize that this potential approach directly refers to the Cartesian skeptical case, wherein holding true beliefs is not seen as a prerequisite for wisdom. Even though Grimm provided a response to Cartesian skepticism — a response deemed reasonable by McCain — it should be pointed out that this response might not satisfy a veritist. As Pritchard observes, extreme skeptical scenarios tend to generate a form of epistemic angst. This unease stems not from massive falsehoods in our beliefs, but from the inability to satisfy our longing for fundamental truth. This longing is implied by our broader desire for truth, but it emphasizes the need to firmly grasp the nature of reality at the fundamental level.<sup>1</sup> Veritists, therefore, do not seek just any truth, but, at least in my view, truth that instills in us a sense of worldly recognition upon its discovery and acceptance. Although it may seem that we are suggesting a desire for a unique kind of truth, it is crucial to note again that Pritchard specifically mentions that this is still about our general desire for truth. We will come back to this point in a moment, but for now, let us keep the idea straightforward, as it is apparently plausible: There are multiple facets of truth — plain, cold, hard, etc. — we discover truth from the world, compared to which we might appear insignificant (according to a scale we ourselves create). However, we do not

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

wish to feel detached, and we yearn for truths that can make us feel our cognitive efforts are acknowledged, and to some extent, responded. These truths should not merely validate our judgments; they should foster an intimate connection, a profound sense of belonging, and a unity with the universe. Therefore, it is understandable we might be more motivated to seek those truths that can affirm both our worthiness and the precision of our perceptions and interpretations of the world.

While the accuracy of my additional comment might be debatable, the essence of Pritchard's assertion is clear: Veritism, when properly understood, does not contend that beliefs that are merely true but lack an epistemic basis share the final epistemic value. To view truth as the goal of inquiry implies a desire for "substantive cognitive contact with reality."<sup>1</sup> In other words, our beliefs should not have a "fortuitous correspondence" with the truth, but "mesh up" with the world "in fundamental ways."<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the defining characteristic of such truth that distinguishes it from other truth lies in its method of acquisition, not its inherent epistemic value. Although we indeed value knowledge and understanding surrounding such truth<sup>3</sup> (given our concern for truth, as suggested by Pritchard), and it is for this reason veritism can respond to the trivial truths objection, the emphasis here is primarily on its being epistemically grounded.<sup>4</sup> The crucial point is that, once we differentiate epistemically grounded truth from truth itself, we can understand why, from a veritist perspective, the main objection raised by skepticism is not that beliefs can be false, but that beliefs can be without a reliable epistemic basis. As long as the epistemic agents considered wise are faced with epistemic angst, their lack of an appropriate epistemic basis would make them counterexamples to veritism, no matter they are considered within a Cartesian skeptic scenario, a Schaffer's skeptic scenario, or any other case.

Recall that Grimm's response to Cartesian skepticism is that overall, one cannot truly achieve wisdom within a matrix (or, more generally, an illusory world). This is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Zagzebski's use of "cognitive contact with reality" in Zagzebski, *Virtues of Mind*.

<sup>2</sup> Pritchard, "Intellectual Virtues," pp. 5524-25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5526.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

because the epistemic agent in question can never fulfill the second condition he proposes, that is, knowing her position relative to what is good or important for well-being. This judgment is consistent with veritist principles, as an individual unaware of her relative position certainly cannot obtain epistemically grounded truth that allows her to have contact with reality in a fundamental way. However, Grimm also argues that these imaginary epistemic agents possess two other types of knowledge that partially constitute wisdom, and veritists may find this contention unsatisfactory. Without knowing their real situation, epistemic agents cannot access any truth based on a solid epistemic basis. Therefore, all the knowledge that they may possibly form lacks the support of the final epistemic value, and consequently cannot be further developed into the highest epistemic good — wisdom. In other words, epistemic agents may possess knowledge or beliefs seemingly akin to those of wise people without appropriate epistemic grounding, but they will not be acknowledged by true veritists as possessing genuine wisdom, for the shared truth is not grounded in the same required manner.

Once this underlying veritist concern within Cartesian skeptic scenarios is revealed, one may soon realize that, in fact, Schaffer's skeptic scenarios pose a more pressing challenge to this point, as the central claim of Schaffer's skepticism about wisdom is exactly that wise individuals do not need an appropriate epistemic basis for their true beliefs. To support this conclusion, McCain presents the case of the debasing demon. If this argument is sound, then it seems that it is indeed feasible to reject the veritist requirement of epistemically grounded truth. This would provide strong reasons to separate wisdom from the truth that veritists genuinely value, laying a foundation for promoting the thesis that wisdom is more fundamental than truth. Thus, the success of the second strategy to argue for wisdom's fundamental status in epistemology largely depends on whether the debasing demon case, as a representative argument, holds up. Nonetheless, a closer examination of it should show that it is not robust enough to convince us to dismiss the necessity of an appropriate epistemic basis.

The debasing demon case postulates the existence of two epistemic agents — one with a suitable epistemic basis, the other without — and it is claimed that they can arrive at the same epistemic state. The crux of McCain's argument is the seeming indistinguishability of the two when it comes to their epistemic results. "If one is wise," he

suggests, “it seems the other is as well.”<sup>1</sup> This conclusion is not overtly flawed, yet there is a hidden problem: “it seems” to whom “the other is as well”? McCain’s framing of the argument suggests that there are two ready-to-assess examples of epistemic outcomes. Readers are invited to objectively analyze them and decide whether these examples are identical or not, as though they are making a comparison between two pre-packaged items. However, this perception is misleading. While McCain’s presentation of the argument gives the impression that readers are only expected to agree with his conclusion — that the two samples match each other — there is actually no conclusion to be reached without the readers’ involvement. In other words, the conclusion can only be drawn when the readers’ judgment is already taken into account. This indispensable role of the reader may initially seem perplexing, as it is indeed very easy to overlook. Nevertheless, if readers do not recognize the wisdom of the epistemically grounded subject, or they do not concede that the two epistemic agents in question share the same epistemic content, or they do not even verify if these two subjects have the same epistemic outcomes, the debased epistemic agent can never be identified as a wise person. Put simply, only when readers accept the premise that the epistemic agent with a sound epistemic basis is wise, and judge that the epistemic situation of the other agent, who lacks such a basis, aligns with the former, can the latter be acknowledged as possessing an equivalent level of wisdom (whether or not this is indeed the case). After all, if readers’ judgment is not necessary in this line of reasoning, McCain could have just declared that the debased subject is also wise, without any need for the setup. However, I doubt if many would accept the claim that “an epistemically ungrounded subject can be wise” when presented on its own.

Once we acknowledge the pivotal role of the readers’ participation for the debasing demon case to work, it is only natural for us to also realize that the readers’ anticipated judgment has to be made in light of the benchmark of the epistemically grounded example. That is to say, the debasing demon case is not genuinely eliminating the condition of appropriate epistemic basis, but rather concealing it within the readers’ evaluation process. Consequently, this case cannot refute the core thesis of veritism, which makes this line of

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<sup>1</sup> McCain, "Debasing Demon," p. 524.



argumentation seem unpromising, irrespective of whether wisdom proves more fundamental than truth or not.

Some readers might notice the application of the process treatment here. It will then be interesting to wonder if mainstream epistemologists' tacit commitment to epistemic realism is once again at play. Had McCain not assumed an existing epistemic fact to contrast with the subject's epistemic status, would he still have overlooked the influence of his readers' judgment on the result of the epistemic assessment? It seems to me that the answer is no, and our discussion in Chapter 2 makes this oversight comprehensible. In fact, our line of thought is not only extendable to the current issue but also to our conception of wisdom. Remember the deceiving Cartesian skeptic case; while it is incompatible with veritism, there remains some superficial plausibility in it. In Grimm's account, such sensibility comes from a type of knowledge that also contributes to wisdom. Nevertheless, it has been argued that this explanation cannot be adopted by veritists. But if veritists argue that true beliefs or knowledge obtained in an epistemically baseless manner do not genuinely possess the final epistemic value, they seem to lack resources to explain why the epistemic agent in question can be somewhat wise. Although veritists could dismiss such apparent plausibility as illusory, the introduction of epistemic expressivism offers an effective solution: It is indeed possible that we initially perceive the characters in the narrative as wise, despite being aware that they lack a proper epistemic grounding and should not be considered wise as such. This could be due to a projection of our own robust sense of reality onto these characters, leading to a neglect of their original background information. However, this misconception is not too severe, as it can resolve itself once we further scrutinize whether these characters can truly be deemed wise — it should become challenging for one to insist on acknowledging their wisdom when their lack of a proper epistemic basis is emphasized. Therefore, by drawing on epistemic expressivism, we can understand and preserve both our initial intuition regarding this case and the central claim of veritism.

That having been said, it is important to clarify that this is merely suggesting that veritism can be supplemented by epistemic expressivism. But this may prompt further consideration about the potential for a replacement relation between the two, a topic that sets the stage for the next phase of our discussion. We will return to this in Section 2.

### **(3) The essence of wisdom is a special subset of truth**

Remember the differentiation we have just made between epistemically grounded truth and truth simpliciter. While Pritchard insists this does not imply a shift from our general pursuit of truth, it is quite tempting to interpret it in another way — that we may indeed be seeking an epistemically grounded truth that is distinct from truth simpliciter. From this, we can derive a third strategy arguing for wisdom as the fundamental concept in epistemology in place of truth: As we delve deeper in our pursuit of truth, we gradually discover wisdom to be potentially more fundamental. This strategy appears even more tenable if we conceive of wisdom as intrinsically connected to a specific type of truth, or as a particular subset of truth. Under these circumstances, our quest for wisdom still seemingly aligns with the core thesis of veritism; however, we are not after truth in its entirety, but only those truths somehow linked to, qualified by, or recognized by wisdom, rendering wisdom more fundamental than truth in this respect. As such, the ultimate pursuit of wisdom and the fundamental nature of truth can be plausibly connected, and there will be no need to attempt to “get away” from the appeal of truth, as seen in strategies (1) and (2). Given that wisdom is often viewed as a complex agential state — not only related to the epistemic aspect, albeit it does take up our primary attention — it might be more accurate to view this strategy as arguing that the essence, or the central part of wisdom, is a unique type of truth. Also, in light of our discussion in (2), the truth that we seek through wisdom should be restricted to truth that is acquired on an appropriate epistemic basis. Thus, this third strategy could be formulated as arguing that the essence of wisdom is a special subset of epistemically grounded truth.

Before we proceed with this approach, it is crucial to reiterate that Pritchard does not intend to differentiate between the pursuit of epistemically grounded truth and the pursuit of truth simpliciter. Our current interpretation not only deviates from the original meaning, but more importantly, brings about more complicated considerations. If the ultimate epistemic goal is construed as epistemically properly based truth, we then encounter a subtle difference between having truth simpliciter and having epistemically grounded truth as the final epistemic goal. This then provokes questions like whether the epistemic value of truth without a suitable epistemic basis should be gauged in terms of epistemically grounded truth. While affirmative answers to these questions may appear

understandable, they would not be in accordance with the core principles that veritists try to defend. In short, when the epistemic objective of virtuous inquirers is redefined as epistemically grounded truth rather than truth simpliciter, it may pose a challenge to the central thesis of veritism. This, of course, is not to suggest that veritism cannot be challenged. The point is that by making such a distinction, we might be drifting away from a standard veritist position. The subsequent question then becomes, how much further are we willing to go from here?

Initially, one may question, as Shane Ryan does, why Pritchard's argument does not consider the grasp of the nature of things as the fundamental epistemic good.<sup>1</sup> If, at the end of the day, it is a profound understanding of the nature of the world that virtuous inquirers seek, it seems plausible to shift our focus from every piece of truth to only those truths that genuinely interest them. Pritchard, in response, would argue that the ultimate form of our veritic desire, namely, the love for truth as developed by virtuous epistemic agents, is merely a refined version of our pursuit of truth, and this refinement does not "involve bringing in this additional axis of evaluation."<sup>2</sup> However, this reply may not convince us. For one, it is not clear why the epistemic value of epistemically grounded truth is merely quantitatively more valuable, not qualitatively, than ordinary truth. Since the crux of Pritchard's narrative is that the ultimate epistemic objective of virtuous inquirers is the fundamental epistemic good<sup>3</sup> and that this points to epistemically grounded truth, it is only natural to conclude that it is this restricted part of truth that holds a fundamental position in epistemology. For another, acknowledging that our epistemic processes begin with a general regard for truth does not rule out the potential for us to realize that our genuine interest lies in a specific subset of truth with special epistemic value. After all, it is common to find ourselves pursuing things that we do not truly desire, and such internal conflicts often only come to light upon sophisticated reflection. And lastly, as mentioned in (2), Pritchard does not actually believe that all true beliefs possess final epistemic value, and this point of view, in fact, contradicts the notion that all truth is

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, not Veritism," p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Pritchard, "Veritic Desire," pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> "Intellectual Virtues," p. 5524.

of fundamental epistemic significance. Benjamin W. McCraw points out that as long as Pritchard denies that all truths are equally valuable epistemically, he cannot hold truth as the fundamental epistemic good. This means Pritchard's position is no longer a standard interpretation of veritism, but another position of epistemic value monism that posits the final epistemic value lies in epistemically grounded truth.<sup>1</sup>

If we accept McCraw's observation as correct, then there are three key points to note: First, since Pritchard has narrowed down the fundamental epistemic good from general truth to epistemically grounded truth, Pritchard's version of veritism, strictly speaking, diverges from what we might call orthodox veritism. Second, recall that Pritchard's adjustment of veritism is made principally to address the trivial truths objection. If this modification is necessary, it suggests that orthodox veritism alone cannot satisfactorily handle this objection, and thereby implying that orthodox veritism has been effectively challenged. This leads to our final point: Our original aim was to challenge veritism by proposing wisdom as a more fundamental concept in epistemology than truth. Since orthodox veritism has already been refuted, our challenge turns out to aim at Pritchard's version of veritism. The revelation of this shift in target should not cause additional worries, as it primarily concerns a choice of terminologies. Nevertheless, there is a subtle yet important point worth stressing: As noted in the last sub-subsection, our aim here is to further develop Shane Ryan's argument, and the need for doing so arises from the fact that his original argument does not sufficiently persuade us to choose it over veritism. To continue Shane Ryan's line of reasoning, there are two steps to go: We must first establish why the acceptance of veritism is problematic, and then demonstrate why the choice of wisdom is more desirable than that of truth. However, at that point, the term "veritism" was understood in the context of Pritchard's interpretation — that is, veritism considered as the supposedly received position regarding our topic of discussion. If the conventionally received position, namely, orthodox veritism has already been overthrown by the trivial truths objection, then there is no theoretical burden for us to bear in finishing the first step. As for the second step, given that Pritchard's version of veritism stands as an evolution of orthodox veritism, and is equipped to handle the trivial truths objection, what

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin W McCraw, "Duncan Pritchard on the Epistemic Value of Truth: Revision or Revolution?," *Philosophia* (forthcoming).

we need to demonstrate becomes the preference for wisdom over the key element in Pritchard's successful vindication — that is, a shift of focus to epistemically grounded truth. As a result, our investigation now aims to compare and establish the plausibility of choosing wisdom over epistemically grounded truth as the more fundamental epistemic good.

The clarification of this point gives us a clearer direction of how we should further develop our current argument. That said, some might wonder why this subtle distinction between orthodox veritism and Pritchard's interpretation was not raised earlier. There are two reasons for this timing: On the one hand, this distinction has nothing to do with the failures of the strategies discussed in (1) and (2). On the other hand, it turns out that the strategy we are examining now aligns surprisingly closely with Pritchard's own project understood in the abovementioned way, as both regard the fundamental epistemic good as a special subset of truth, and thus attempt to develop veritism from being epistemic value truth monism to a position that is more selective about the kind of truth it concerns (though note that while Pritchard's version of veritism is epistemic value epistemologically grounded truth monism, our tentative position is not necessarily monist). More importantly, as both interpretations are refined versions of veritism, neither holds the established, received status that orthodox veritism does. Therefore, if we find Pritchard's reasoning compelling, then, at least superficially, the strategy we propose shares an equal degree of plausibility. This allows us to compare these two positions on the same ground.

However, if we develop this strategy in the way just described, would it not essentially become a further restriction of epistemically grounded truth that virtuous inquirers are supposed to pursue? What would be the benefit, or even significance of making this seemingly minor additional limitation? The answer to this question is that there is at least one unique theoretical advantage in the current context that we are in — that is, this third strategy is capable of plausibly explaining why there are inconsistent answers to the question about whether beliefs contributing to one's wisdom should be true.

The fact that there are conflicting answers to a philosophical question is nothing new to know. The reason why this phenomenon under discussion is especially interesting is because of its inherent intuitive appeal, which suggests that the truth condition question regarding wisdom might not have a straightforward "yes" or "no" answer, hence the

external challenge from the diversity of responses in reality.<sup>1</sup> An example to support this intuition could be: Suppose there is an epistemic agent who, due to her temporal and spatial circumstances, holds mostly false beliefs, yet she is still recognized as wise. Then, consider also a wise individual with the majority of her beliefs being true on an appropriate epistemic basis. The question is, is there necessarily a significant difference in their levels of wisdom? The answer is most likely no. Considering that many (or perhaps even most, for various reasons) of those paradigmatically wise people that we admire are situated like the former subject, it is not difficult to accept that two epistemic agents with a considerable difference in the ratio of epistemically grounded true beliefs could share a similar level of wisdom, or even that those with a lower percentage could be wiser than those with a greater one.

The aim here is not to make a detailed comparison of the proportion of epistemically properly based true beliefs within the entire set of beliefs between two wise individuals, but to illustrate that the accumulation of such true beliefs does not greatly impact the comparison. This is, of course, not to say that epistemic basis is not important at all. As was just demonstrated in (2), the case is quite the opposite. Nevertheless, if we follow either orthodox veritism or Pritchard's version of veritism, as long as we regard wisdom as the highest or the most prized epistemic good, it is not easy to conceive it without the backing of the fundamental epistemic good. And it follows that the quantity of truth or epistemically grounded truth matters in our evaluation of one's wisdom, because it seems nonsensical to say that two similar projects, one with significantly greater support than the other, do not lead to a significantly different outcome (when no extra factor intervenes). Consequently, both orthodox veritism and Pritchard's veritism struggle to account for the mixed responses and related intuition in a convincing way.

In contrast, our strategy does provide a reasonable explanation: If the supporting fundamental epistemic value is determined by wisdom itself, then truth or epistemically

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<sup>1</sup> The complexity here is at least twofold: First, not everyone agrees that beliefs contributing to one's wisdom need to be true based on an appropriate epistemic basis. Second, there is no consensus that all wisdom-related beliefs should meet this standard. However, for the purposes of our current discussion, we should pay special attention to a common intuition: We may be tempted to determine whether all wisdom-related beliefs should be true based on an appropriate epistemic basis by considering whether a subset of such beliefs is expected to be so.

grounded truth is only relevant to our assessment of one's wisdom when it falls within the scope of truth that is required by wisdom. In other words, whether or not a belief contributing to one's wisdom should be true is decided by wisdom *per se* — a piece of epistemically grounded truth is only necessary for wise individuals to hold when it is directly related to wisdom, but if it is only instrumentally relevant, or even not relevant, then it is not. For instance, if general wisdom is meant to be concerned with the subject of living well, then only those truths that are directly connected to this subject are deemed necessary and expected to be acquired on a suitable epistemic basis. These truths, due to their direct relevance to the subject matter of wisdom, become the fundamental epistemic good that holds the final epistemic value. While here is not the place to provide a definitive account of general wisdom (let alone suggesting that it is solely about living well), understanding the relation between truth and wisdom in this way effectively accounts for why we find people living in ancient times or remote places to be as wise as, or even wiser than those who have access to truths that are better epistemically grounded — if what matters most are their opinions about life, then advancements in epistemic basis understandably do not necessarily offer significant advantage. Because a theory of wisdom can evaluate different parts of a candidate's epistemic status with different epistemic standards, the intuition that a wise person does not always have to possess (epistemically grounded) true beliefs, and the phenomenon that incompatible answers can be given to the truth condition question about wisdom can both be understood in a reasonable way.

The upshot of the above discussion is that when focusing on accounting for the phenomena surrounding the truth requirements for wisdom, namely, addressing the external challenge that our discussions of wisdom pose to veritism, strategy (3) provides a better solution than both orthodox veritism and Pritchard's developed version. If our reasoning is sound, then this strategy suggests a refinement of veritism that sees the fundamental epistemic good as a distinct subset of truth — the epistemically grounded truth directly related to wisdom. Wisdom thus predetermines the scope of truth that is considered fundamental in epistemology, making wisdom, from this perspective, more fundamental than truth. This in turn validates strategy (3) as an effective internal challenge to veritism.

An additional outcome of this line of reasoning is the revelation of the relationship between veritism and the position that this strategy results in: Considering the similarity

between Pritchard's restrictions and ours, as well as the claim that Pritchard's proposal is a variant of veritism, it seems plausible to think that our strategy too carries the essence of veritism. Since our current position indeed acknowledges that what enjoys the final epistemic value is still a type of truth, it could be regarded as a developed version of veritism as well. However, the focus should not rest on disputes over terminology. The more crucial question here is whether our approach brings in something else that is more significant than merely making a further limitation. Remember that Pritchard is extremely cautious in his refinement and resists considering it a non-orthodox way out — what could be the probable concern behind this cautiousness? What is the genuine difference between viewing truth and viewing a narrowed-down scope of truth as the fundamental epistemic good? What, then, is the actual difference between Pritchard's restriction and our further restriction? A deeper worry underlying these questions is that if the strategy of selection is no more than an adaptation of the veritist doctrine to make it defensible against various challenges, then would this not lead to the worry that there will be endless challenges requiring corresponding enhancements, and the strategy's vindication of veritism consequently suffers from the same pessimistic outlook as in the case of knowledge analysis? But if that is not the intention, the other side of this anxiety lies in our uncertainty about the true nature of our innovation. If it is neither a simple defense nor a denial, it may suggest something far more profound: a potential paradigm shift that could reshape our understanding of truth, wisdom, their interconnection, the problem of epistemic value, and even the larger framework of epistemology itself. And this once again leads us back to the question of how far we will go, and how far we are willing to stray from the supposedly widely accepted position of veritism. As we will see in the following sub-subsection, it may take more than expected to give clear answers to these issues.

### 1.3.3 Wisdom as the End of Epistemic Process

To recapitulate in another way, the discussion in the previous sub-subsection focused on three claims that cannot simultaneously be true: (i) Beliefs contributing to one's wisdom are not always required to be true (based on an appropriate epistemic basis). (ii) Wisdom is the highest, or the most prized, epistemic good that needs to be supported by



the fundamental epistemic good. And (iii) The fundamental epistemic good is truth (based on an appropriate epistemic basis). We gathered claim (i) from inconsistent answers to whether a wise person ought to hold epistemically grounded true beliefs; responses seem to reasonably fluctuate between affirmative and negative. Claim (ii) is a plausible assertion inferred from a common assumption among philosophers and ordinary people. Claim (iii), in the meantime, is an intuitively appealing thesis traditionally assumed in epistemology, and can be labelled as the thesis of veritism. Claims (i) and (ii) do not appear to conflict with each other. The problem arises when we introduce claim (iii). If wisdom is to be supported by the fundamental epistemic good, and this fundamental epistemic good is, according to veritism, (epistemically grounded) truth, then the assessment of one's wisdom in its epistemic respect must be significantly influenced by the number of (epistemically grounded) true beliefs that she possesses. However, judging one's wisdom from the perspective of (epistemically grounded) truth is not effective as long as claim (i) is taken into consideration, for being (epistemically grounded) true is not constantly required for wise individuals' beliefs. Consequently, if we accept claims (i) and (iii), wisdom is not consistently supported by the fundamental epistemic good as required by claim (ii); if we embrace claims (ii) and (iii), then we must deny the implication of claim (i).

Through our discussion there emerged a possible way out, which is to revise (iii), namely, the traditional veritist thesis, by replacing truth with wisdom as the epistemic good that is of final value, hence the revised claim (iii\*) The fundamental epistemic good is wisdom. Claim (iii\*) is a natural extension of the veritist argument based on virtuous inquiry for (iii), which argues that it is the ultimate epistemic goal of virtuous inquirers that determines what serves as the fundamental epistemic good, and wisdom seems to be a reasonable option for virtuous inquirers to aim at. If this approach holds water, (i), (ii), and (iii\*) can be harmonized in a plausible way, as under such circumstances, wisdom can self-supply the fundamental epistemic value without recourse to truths beyond wisdom's necessary conditions.

Three strategies to flesh out (iii\*) were scrutinized to determine whether this solution can withstand rigorous examination. They respectively develop their arguments based on the following premises: (1) Inquiry culminates in wisdom. (2) Wisdom does not necessitate true belief. And (3) The essence of wisdom is a special subset of truth. Premise

(1) posits that forming wisdom is the final step of inquiry that succeeds in seeking the truth. Premise (2) contends that the conception of wisdom does not necessitate the contributing beliefs being true on a proper epistemic basis. While (1) appears acceptable and (2) does not, both fail to satisfactorily illustrate how we can conceptualize wisdom without truth as the fundamental guide. In contrast, premise (3) paves a way for understanding how wisdom can plausibly surpass truth in epistemological fundamentality. An interpretation of (3) suggests that the conception of wisdom only requires the contributing beliefs to be true on a proper epistemic basis when they are directly related to the subject matter of wisdom. That is to say, wisdom's essential epistemic component is a subset of epistemically grounded truth, specified by its own topic. As it is wisdom that delineates the scope of required epistemological grounded truths to attain virtuous inquiry's ultimate epistemic goal — wisdom itself — wisdom can be viewed as more fundamental than truth in this respect.

The plausibility of (3) does not only enable us to reconcile claims (i), (ii), and (iii\*), but also offers two additional, yet significant benefits: First, when equipped with (3), (iii\*) can effectively explain (i). That is, due to the varying epistemic standards applicable to different sections of a wise individual's belief set, divergent answers may naturally arise regarding the necessity of epistemically grounded true beliefs for wisdom. Second, the union of claims (i), (ii), and (iii\*) can sensibly accommodate both our inherent inclination towards seeking truth, and our ultimate epistemic goal of attaining wisdom, both of which intuitively reasonably serve as the end of our epistemic journey. Introducing these two points is essential as they reflect the two longstanding threads of thought in this dissertation. The implicit strand posits that our theoretical efforts aim to account for our epistemic linguistic practice, and thus value successful explanations, which substantiate the first point. The explicit strand interprets our epistemic discourse in light of our epistemic desires, which are supposed to aim for specific epistemic goals, such as truth or wisdom as in the second point. We can see their concurrent appearance as a confluence achieved through our development of veritism — by regarding wisdom as what we ultimately epistemically desire, we are able to account for a phenomenon in our epistemic linguistic practice. However, if we stop here, the result might seem uneventful. The interesting part surfaces

when we extend this way of thinking to incorporate other key elements from earlier discussions, and put them together in a coherent story:

Recall that this exploration was originally intended to provide a definitive answer to the truth condition question regarding wisdom, which exemplifies a series of questions concerning the theorization of wisdom raised in the first chapter. Now, based on our trust in the preliminary feasibility of the traditional epistemological position of veritism, a trust justified by the practical utility of our epistemic discourse, as concluded in the preceding chapter, we do have a definitive response. However, some readers may have already noticed that this response, derived from an examination of veritism, offers a “treatment” of wisdom, rather than a typical answer about whether or not a truth condition exists within the concept of wisdom. What is being presented here is not merely a perspective for better understanding the question of wisdom’s truth condition but also a method to directly tackle it. This treatment of wisdom is a manner of engaging with the concept that its value resides less in its representation of an epistemic fact, but more in its plausibility as per our evaluation.

Upon realizing that our approach to the truth condition question about wisdom leads to a direct interaction with the concept of wisdom itself, the distinctive significance of this question to this dissertation becomes evident, for our core mission from the outset has been to develop a more plausible theory of wisdom. And given that the treatment of wisdom as virtuous inquirers’ ultimate epistemic goal is grounded on the reliability of traditional epistemological veritism, it appears to be a viable option for us to consider. Viewing wisdom from this perspective invites us to perceive wisdom within a broader context, going beyond merely focusing on what it is (or more specifically, what its necessary and sufficient conditions are), to its role within the entirety of epistemic discourse. This perspective aligns our consideration of wisdom with our interpretation of the epistemic discourse in a way that is perhaps more profound than initially presumed. Considering that the explicit line of thought that we have developed views our epistemic discourse as driven by our desire for certain epistemic goals, since wisdom is now considered the ultimate epistemic goal, it should thereby serve as what ultimately drives our epistemic practices. Therefore, the conception of wisdom is not simply passively determined by its relative position in the network of epistemic concepts, but also actively shapes the way our

epistemic discourse can be defined. In other words, not only can we comprehend various questions regarding wisdom by examining its relationship with other established epistemic notions in our epistemic discourse, but we can also interpret our epistemic linguistic practice through the lens of wisdom, which could serve as the fundamental epistemic concept providing the final epistemic value — the fundamental epistemic good. For this dissertation, it is crucial to note that this pursuit of wisdom, which drives our epistemic practices, allows us to theorize wisdom as the ultimate end of our epistemic process.

Synthesizing our initial assumption and this development leads us to a twofold perspective on theorizing wisdom through process: On the one hand, it equips us with a process-based understanding of wisdom among other epistemic concepts as being produced, and can be defined as such. On the other hand, it introduces a notion of wisdom in terms of the process itself, emphasizing its role as both the fundamental good and the ultimate goal of our epistemic journey. Due to wisdom's unique position within the process, this dual perspective of wisdom sheds new light to our wisdom theorization not only because it moves beyond the focus on wisdom's conceptual constituents, but also because it prompts an approach informed by our process understanding of our epistemic discourse and other epistemic practices. A process theory of wisdom derives from it may not automatically surpass other alternatives, particularly the extensively discussed theories presented in the first chapter. Nonetheless, before assessing whether this new approach can outperform its competing theories and address the difficulties that they face, two more issues need to be clarified. The first refers to the lingering concerns mentioned towards the end of the previous sub-section; that is, as this treatment of wisdom is developed based on our refinement of veritism, there is some uncertainty about the true nature of this maneuver requiring attention. The second is that by aligning our consideration of wisdom with our previous discussion, we invite not only the explicit line of thought, but also the implicit thread that is accompanied by the worry about whether our “epistemic expressivist” approach can make sense of our epistemic discourse as much as the supposedly traditionally received epistemic realism. We will revisit the second issue in the next section, while addressing the first one for the remainder of this section.

The discussion in the previous sub-subsection brought up questions about the relation between veritism and our project, especially concerning how far our refinement

will deviate from the original stance of veritism. It now becomes clear why responding to these questions are important for this dissertation — because the underlying worry should also extend to the theorization of wisdom through this lens. What would be the significant implications of conceptualizing wisdom as the ultimate end of our epistemic process? Compared to veritism, particularly Pritchard's refined version of veritism (if it is interpreted as a position distinct from orthodox veritism), our approach distinguishes itself by prioritizing wisdom over truth as the fundamental epistemic good, in the sense that wisdom constrains the scope of epistemically grounded truth that is considered relevant to virtuous inquirers' ultimate epistemic goal. Apparently, this is similar to Pritchard's approach, which also narrows the range of truths pursued by virtuous inquirers, and it is thus tempting to see our direction as merely making a further restriction. However, such a view risks missing the crux of the matter. Consider, for example, a theory of wisdom might demand that wise individuals hold all true beliefs based on a suitable epistemic basis. In this case, if we focus solely on the restriction's extent, our approach might seem indistinguishable from Pritchard's. Yet, if we pay due attention to the emphasis that it is wisdom that sets the boundary, our approach appears distinctly different. Simply put, in our development of veritism (assuming the term still applies), the concept of wisdom takes precedence in determining what is epistemically valuable. Although, at the end of the day, it still concerns truth, the latter is only introduced as a consequence of this way of thinking. This hierarchical relationship might initially seem straightforward, but it becomes much more complex upon reflection, as it invites some profound theoretical concerns.

Crudely speaking, there are two ways to perceive this hierarchy where wisdom precedes truth. A conservative reading of the precedence of wisdom simply means that we use wisdom to help us understand the concept of epistemic value. As is suggested by Pritchard, we should follow the "virtue-turn" to address issues related to epistemic value.<sup>1</sup> The concept of epistemic value is notoriously abstract to be captured and philosophized. Approaching it from the viewpoint of intellectual virtues, which we are more familiar with and have more information about, could be beneficial in making progress in relevant discussion. This is an appealing proposal, for, on the one hand, there is a natural connection

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<sup>1</sup> Pritchard, "Intellectual Virtues," p. 5522.

between the inquirers that we respect and the elements of inquiry that we value from an epistemological standpoint. Identifying good epistemic agents and recognizing the traits that lead us to admire them in relation to cognition seem to be tasks that are much more manageable than directly defining epistemic value. On the other hand, the idea that we can pinpoint epistemic value seems less feasible than the idea that we can locate good inquirers. In fact, from the perspective of our epistemic expressivist line of thought, it seems curious enough that something like epistemic value could be there and epistemic facts about it could be discovered. The difficulty in handling problems centering around epistemic value is both a result of the absence of readily available epistemic facts related to these issues and evidence of such an absence. In contrast, conceptualizing epistemic value based on what exemplary epistemic agents strive for seems much more understandable and likely to lead to a conclusion.

However, it is important to remember that epistemic expressivism is not the mainstream view in epistemology, and it follows that an approach that aligns with our perspective may also be viewed as unorthodox. We may learn how unconventional this view could be from the standpoint of many philosophers in light of McCraw's commentary on the implications of Pritchard's project. McCraw argues that Pritchard's version of veritism could be further developed along two routes: The first is REVISE, which is treating it as a revision of epistemic value truth monism, in basically the same way as we did previously. And the second is REVOLUTION, which is much more radical, to the degree that it leads to an epistemological revolution. REVOLUTION suggests that the final epistemic value does not reside in a cognitive state as proposed by veritism and many other positions about epistemic value, but in how such value is formed — it is the virtuous agency that constitutes the epistemically grounded true beliefs that matters. Truth, in this view, is only epistemically valuable in an instrumental sense.<sup>1</sup> The second result (or perhaps consequence) certainly deviates greatly from Pritchard's own view. But it is not difficult, especially from our perspective, to understand why McCraw could see this as an extension of Pritchard's reasoning. After all, if, ultimately, virtuous inquirers — idealized versions of ourselves as epistemic agents — are the ones who determine the fundamental epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> McCraw, "Pritchard on Epistemic Value."

good, would it not make sense that we ourselves, or more specifically, our best or ideal epistemic agents, are the source of the final epistemic value? Does this line of reasoning not imply that it is because we, represented by the virtuous inquirers, value certain cognitive states in the first place, then it comes to their turn to become epistemically valuable? Furthermore, as was just mentioned, this is not only a natural progression of the story of virtuous inquirers, but also a challenge to the epistemic realist presumption at play in debates about epistemic value. As argued in Chapter 3, turning to our actual practice of epistemic evaluation can effectively reduce the theoretical burden in accounting for the assumption that there exist accessible epistemic facts. Since it is difficult to locate epistemic value and epistemic facts about it, developing the theorization of epistemic value from the real process of our epistemic assessment is a plausible alternative. The worry, however, might lie in the fact that while this approach may hold considerable merit, it is a considered a “radical” departure from established thinking, a term that is not typically associated with ease or comfort.

Labeling a philosophical approach as radical does not mean that it is wrong. The potential worry is still that, in philosophy, gains usually come with losses. When our aim is to reach an explicitly unconventional, radical, or even revolutionary position, we must anticipate a series of significant theoretical challenges. Merely performing better on specific issues cannot provide a completely satisfying account for all the problems a standard position would by default be expected to address. Considering that space constraints prevent us from looking into every relevant issue, and that it is also hard to identify all the issues that need our attention, this worry appears to be insurmountable within the scope of our dissertation. Nevertheless, in Chapter 3, the tone was laid as that epistemic expressivism is mostly an “alternative” approach when the difficulties that epistemic realism faces (most prominently the problem of locating accessible epistemic facts) seem insoluble. Although the potential issues that epistemic expressivism may encounter would not disappear simply because no explicit demand for favoring epistemic expressivism over epistemic realism was made, the immediate theoretical burden of providing an answer to every pending question is considerably reduced. In other words, the proposal was made expecting people to consider it as a viable alternative, which is worth reflecting on and may develop into a fuller account, rather than assuming it as an

outright replacement for the established position. Furthermore, recall our previous discussion about realism, the so-claimed standard position for both ordinary people and philosophers, also mentioned a similar worry:

A realist conception of the world is something that, all else being equal, ordinary mature human agents whose cognitive faculties are functioning adequately in a world such as ours take for granted in their everyday doings and believings. According to the realists, so deeply ingrained is this way of viewing reality in our shared world picture, that it is difficult to find propositions more obvious than those constitutive of realism itself that can be employed to formulate a non-question-begging argument in favor of it. This, so realists aver, is why positive arguments for realism regarding the external world are so difficult to come by. And it is also why, when arguments are offered for realism, they generally have the form of teasing out the implausible implications of its rivals rather than citing the theoretically positive characteristics of realism itself.<sup>1</sup>

Cuneo seems to maintain that such difficulties are unique to realism for it is taken for granted. However, our implicit thread about the theory-practice relationship suggests something different. Essentially, the concern arises from the approach to theorize, but not which approach to theorize. Considering the rationale provided by Cuneo, it seems that any theory trying to reflect our daily life experience as a whole is likely to adopt a defensive stance against articulated challenges, rather than making explicit affirmations of its own position, regardless of whether it is realism or not. Thus, this is not a problem exclusive to realism but extends to any theoretical position that aligns with our general intuitive understanding of the world, which includes our epistemic expressivist approach. As have been stressed multiple times, our approach aims only to reflect our actual linguistic practices more accurately than realism does. Drawing on Cuneo's observation, it is both reasonable for such a concern to arise and acceptable for us not to fully resolve it, at least to the degree that realism is allowed to.

In conclusion, this section starts our exploration of the theorization of wisdom, building upon an understanding of our epistemic discourse that is driven by our epistemic desires and justified by its practical utility. Our journey began with the exemplary consideration of whether the beliefs contributing to one's wisdom need to be true. This question was examined in light of veritism, a traditionally accepted epistemological

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<sup>1</sup> Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 10.



framework that posits truth as the fundamental epistemic good. From this standpoint, it would appear that wisdom, as an epistemic concept, must incorporate a necessary condition of truth. However, our analysis of the challenges faced by veritism, especially the external and the internal challenge brought by our discussion of the truth condition question about wisdom, led us to suggest a refined version of veritism. This refinement draws on both veritism's own argument from virtuous inquiry and our concern for wisdom, and narrows down the fundamental epistemic good to wisdom, viewed as a special subset of epistemically grounded truth directly related to wisdom. Considering this refined version of veritism, we propose a plausible response to the truth condition question for wisdom, which is that a theory of wisdom needs only to necessitate a specific scope of beliefs to be true on an appropriate epistemic basis, and this scope is determined by wisdom itself. Furthermore, as this refinement is developed with the perspective of the idealized long-term inquiry conducted by virtuous inquirers, it yields a twofold process understanding of the theorization of wisdom. Initially, while we commenced with merely the aim to theorize wisdom based on veritism, it turned out that wisdom, unlike most other epistemic notions, enjoys a unique status as the ultimate end of our epistemic process. This enables us to theorize wisdom not only regarding its relative position in the epistemological conceptual web, but also in terms of our epistemic process as a whole. More profoundly, our proposal leads to a revolutionary interpretation of veritism and the epistemic discourse that prioritizes the role of epistemic agents and their desires, aligning with our epistemic expressivist line of thought. This alignment, in effect, connects our practically justified acceptance of the epistemic discourse and our pursuit of a more plausible theorization of wisdom within the epistemic expressivist framework, allowing us to theorize wisdom from the perspective of the process understanding of our epistemic discourse.

That being said, this union of our previous discussions also brings up the lingering implicit issue in our line of thought related to the comparison between the plausibility of epistemic realism and epistemic expressivism, particularly in how well they can account for our epistemic discourse. It has been stated that this issue is a key one that this dissertation aims to address. We will finally develop our response to it in the following section.

## 2. Wisdom, Epistemic Expressivism, and the Pragmatic Turn

This section will focus on addressing the concerns raised by our implicit line of thought. The aim is to demonstrate that the conclusions that we have drawn, especially the framework of epistemic expressivism, can perform comparably with traditionally accepted views, specifically metaepistemological realism. Subsection 2.1 will begin by looking at the advantages of epistemic expressivism. It will not only show that epistemic expressivism is preferable on particular epistemological issues, but also its potential to provide a more plausible approach on a comprehensive level. Subsection 2.2., on the other hand, will examine a potential weakness of epistemic expressivism, which is also the persistent issue in our exploration. Sub-subsection 2.2.1 will be devoted to discussing the nature of the aspect in which our project falls short compared to epistemic realism. Sub-subsection 2.2.2 will then develop a response to this issue by proposing a shift in how it should be addressed.

### 2.1 Advantages of Epistemic Expressivism

So far, we have been talking about how our line of thought could potentially raise certain concerns, a point that, perhaps, has been overly emphasized to an unfair degree. Labeling epistemic expressivism, with its view that wisdom is the fundamental epistemic good, as “radical” suggests not only that there are worries surrounding this stance, but also that it holds certain advantages, without which it would not be worth considering at all. In Chapter 3, we proposed that epistemic expressivism has more merit as a second-order position in epistemology when it comes to addressing challenges associated with epistemological intuitions — specifically, those questioning epistemologists’ expert intuitions in light of empirical studies, and the problem of motivation. With regard to the first aspect, it was shown that epistemic expressivists prioritize how to satisfy our epistemic desires over what are widely taken as epistemic facts. By placing more importance on which intuition “should” be appreciated than on which intuition is actually held by the majority, epistemic expressivism can effectively mitigate the challenge posed by the disparity between epistemologists and the general public’s views towards epistemological debates. Turning to the second aspect, it was argued that, unlike epistemic realism,

epistemic expressivism can seamlessly bridge the gap between our motivations and our epistemic actions in a natural way. This also leads to some other respects in which epistemic expressivism excels. For instance, it provides a more coherent explanation for how we are guided by specific epistemic norms by seeing them as essentially approaches to respond to our own epistemic desires.

While these strengths are compelling, they may seem somewhat trivial when compared to the robust support the conventional position is believed to provide to the epistemological program. Although it has been acknowledged that demonstrating how an alternative can fulfill every facet of a default epistemological theory's role is difficult, it remains crucial to identify at least some key advantages of epistemic expressivism. These advantages should be convincing enough for us to consider it as a comprehensive alternative accounting for the whole course of epistemology, not just for some particular intuitions or cases. Fortunately, this new perspective indeed presents certain such valuable advantages. One such merit lies in its potential to provide a solution to the probably infamous Gettier problem, a conundrum that has persistently troubled contemporary epistemology.<sup>1</sup> Should epistemic expressivism succeed in explaining away the concerns surrounding the Gettier problem, it would demonstrate its capability to make a significant contribution to a wide range of our epistemological research.

Longstanding debates on how to resolve the Gettier problem seem to suggest that a universally satisfying conclusion is indeed unavailable. This difficulty has fostered a sense of pessimism among many epistemologists,<sup>2</sup> which is developed through some sort of argument from pessimism into doubts about contemporary epistemological studies. One major complaint about this rather pessimistic looking situation is that there are too many newly developed complicated cases and *ad hoc* counterexamples. Nevertheless, the issue should not lie with the examples themselves, as long as they are real-life or possible situations that we need to address. Instead, the problem may arise from our attempt to accommodate every single epistemic situation with a single, unvarying account of

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund L Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," *Analysis* 23, no. 6 (1963); Linda Zagzebski, "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems," *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1950-) 44, no. 174 (1994), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2220147>.

<sup>2</sup> Pritchard, "On Meta-Epistemology," pp. 100-01.

cognition. And, evidently, this kind of thinking, which could be labeled as “invariantism,” aligns with the traditional belief in invariant epistemic facts that we can learn and apply to new scenarios.

However, as is often the case, encountering difficulties does not necessarily mean that this so-called invariantist way of thinking is wrong. What is problematic, according to Matthew Chrisman, is that it overlooks the specific context in which epistemic evaluation takes place, rendering it incapable of responding satisfactorily to the following skeptic argument (SA):

P1: S doesn't know that he's not a brain-in-a-vat,

P2: If S doesn't know that he's not brain-in-a-vat, then S doesn't know that-*o* [where *o* is any obvious proposition, knowledge of which we would ordinarily attribute to S],

C: Thus, S doesn't know that-*o*.<sup>1</sup>

The core issue here essentially resides in the fact that, under ordinary circumstances, even if one is a brain-in-a-vat, it still stands to reason that a considerable amount of knowledge can be attributed to such an epistemic agent. However, if we stick to the epistemic standard that one cannot know anything as long as she is not aware of the fact that she is a brain-in-a-vat, then such customary knowledge attributions should not be made. Even though, as revealed in Chapter 2, I do not find this issue as alarming as many philosophers might, they do deem it unacceptable — that is, they believe that invariantists could not deal with SA without “biting a bullet.”<sup>2</sup> In contrast, contextualism seems to be better prepared to respond to SA. Contextualists argue that the epistemic standard adopted under everyday situations is not as high as in the context of SA, for the underlying logical form of our epistemic sentences includes an indexical indicating the specific epistemic standard against which the epistemic judgment is made in each context. As a result, our knowledge attributions vary across different contexts despite their superficial sameness or

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Chrisman, "From Epistemic Contextualism to Epistemic Expressivism," *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): p. 225. Note that Chrisman later changed his view. See "From Epistemic Expressivism to Epistemic Inferentialism," in *Social Epistemology*, ed. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> "Epistemic Contextualism to Epistemic Expressivism," p. 225.

similarities. For example, when we claim “He knows that p.” in different scenarios, the proposition contained in the sentence is not merely that “He knows that p.” but “He knows that p when judged against the current epistemic standard.” As for which epistemic standard is actually at play, it depends on the context in which the judgment is made. Since the skeptic context can be seen as separated from the ordinary context, contextualism is thus able to explain the conflicting intuitions in SA by proposing that they are made in light of different epistemic standards, and there is no genuine conflict between them.

That said, in Chrisman’s eyes, contextualism faces two significant issues: The first is the “dialectical intuitions problem.” Briefly speaking, while different contexts may impose varying requirements for knowledge, in everyday conversations, we can still agree or disagree with knowledge attributions (based on the current epistemic standards), regardless of the standards set by the original contexts. If contextualism is valid, then we must weaken such an intuition. In other words, we must weaken our confidence in making knowledge attributions as they could be made in light of a unified standard across contexts, for the same attributions now carry different meanings in light of the particular epistemic standards at play in different contexts. This makes it difficult to explain, say, how we can alter our prior opinions on one’s epistemic states when contexts change, yet consider the revision of the original epistemic judgment as a modification of the old judgment, rather than forming a new one. The second issue is the “*ad hoc* semantics problem.” In essence, contextualists take it to be the case that we use epistemic sentences in different contexts without being aware that they, in fact, express different meanings, similar to how we use terms like “flat.”<sup>1</sup> When we use “flat” to describe something, we naturally mean that that thing is relatively flat, as in normal situations nothing is absolutely flat, and we can readily accept this fact when it is pointed out, calmly acknowledging that by attributing the property of flatness to different objects, we are not expressing the idea that they are equally flat. Nevertheless, it seems too demanding, at least to Chrisman, for us to apply this way of thinking to knowledge ascriptions. While this is conceivable and could be counted as a reasonable solution to the challenge posed by SA, it might not be as natural for people to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Stewart Cohen, “Contextualism and Unhappy-Face Solutions: Reply to Schiffer,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 119, no. 1/2 (2004). This may remind readers of our discussion of the relativist treatment of “mass” in Chapter 2.

accept that they are using the term “know(s)” unconsciously in a context-dependent manner as in the case of “flat.” Indeed, if we were to tell someone that she would use “know(s)” with a different meaning in a skeptical scenario than in daily conversation, it would most likely only confuse her. By contrast, in the case of “flat,” all it takes to explain this point is to note that things are only relatively flat in ordinary scenarios (to the extent that contextualism would allow).

Perhaps another way to frame the core issue of the dialectical intuitions problem is as a dilemma. On the one hand, if contextualism, in effect, does not allow for the making of epistemic judgments across different contexts, then there would be no room for SA to raise the skeptic challenge. From the very beginning, the high epistemic standard employed in the skeptic context has nothing to do with our regular epistemic judgments made under lower epistemic standards. However, this essentially renders the problem that contextualism seeks to address non-existent. That is, contextualism seems to be avoiding the problem, rather than addressing an issue that they do find challenging. On the other hand, if contextualism supports cross-contextual epistemic judgments, then it appears to lose its power when used to counter SA. The reason is that the skeptics’ argument is developed along the same direction — that their high-standard epistemic judgments should apply to everyday knowledge attributions. Viewing the core issue from this angle, what is problematic is that, while we can make diverse epistemic judgments for the same phenomenon in different contexts, the conflict that arises when comparing these judgments is intolerable (to many philosophers), yet such comparison seems inevitable. Among the philosophers who want to find a way to account for the contradiction, contextualists identify an element neglected by invariantism, namely, the variation of contexts. Their strategy resembles a “divide and conquer” approach, in the sense that they alleviate the conflict by isolating conflicting judgments within their specific contexts. Nonetheless, it offers no help when these separate judgments are brought together for comparison, and thus fails to provide a fully satisfying account. And here is where epistemic expressivism’s potential strength lies: While contextualism improves upon invariantism by taking into consideration the background against which judgments are made, it neglects another easily forgotten but also varying factor in the process of making judgments — the very subjects who produce these judgments. Indeed, it is well acknowledged that there are (at least) four

common elements that we should consider when we discuss an event: the time, place, subject, and activity. The activity under discussion is no other but our epistemic evaluation, and the time and place are represented by the contexts. But what about the subject?

It is tempting to dismiss the subject as insignificant or unworthy of much attention. After all, in normal circumstances, what truly matters is whether the assessment made is correct, and the subject who is making the assessment is not the priority during examination. Even when the focus is shifted to the subject, she is most likely taken into account considering her ability to make judgment. For instance, when someone is taking an exam and choosing an answer to a given question, the most crucial factor that we consider is usually whether the answer chosen is the right one. As for how she arrives at this answer, how she can improve, and any other elements that may have influenced their exam performance, they are often discussed subsequently, in light of the correctness of her answer. While this is a typical way to examine one's judgment, it relies on the existence of a correct answer, a feature of an objective exam. And, conversely, there are subjective exams, which lack specific and predetermined answers, and are thus more complicated to make evaluation than their objective counterparts. It is not our intention here to spell out every aspect of such complexity, rather, the presentation of this pair of examples is to illustrate an important point: In subjective exams, although there are certain standards for evaluating the examinee's performance, the evaluation does not only adhere to the standards in a far less rigid way, but also heavily depends on how the examinees perform, rather than solely the outcome they produce. Furthermore, even among subjective exams, there is an additional distinction. One could imagine that a subject exam is done by sending a recorded file to the examiner. However, normally, subjective exams are, and are better conducted in-person. A typical subjective exam might take the form of an interview, which not only provides a more comprehensive insight into the examinee's abilities, but also allows for interaction between the examiner and the examinee. And it is this interaction aspect that is particularly noteworthy. Saying that invariantism and contextualism fail to include the subjects making epistemic judgments in their narratives does not imply that they have no idea that there must be subjects in the first place for judgments to derive from. Instead, it suggests that they fail to consider the subjects as active, living generators of the judgments. These judgment makers can participate in the course of epistemic discourse,

and we can, in principle, communicate and interact with them. When they make their epistemic assessment, they do not merely submit their answers to be examined, but also contribute to the epistemic discourse in an engaging manner. In an interview, if the examiner finds the examinee's response to her question peculiar, she would normally be curious and ask about the rationale behind the examiner's choice of words. Similarly, when we encounter conflicting epistemic judgments across different contexts and find this phenomenon insufferable, it is only natural for us to also want explanations from the judgment makers regarding why they made their judgments in such ways. If this kind of conversations cannot happen in reality, then at the very least, we should interpret their epistemic judgments as conveying something particularly unusual or distinctive that makes us feel strange.

The point to note here is that the focus in this kind of situations should be on what the judgment makers intend to communicate — what they genuinely want to express by using such-and-such words. This is easily overlooked and differs significantly from what invariantists and contextualists think should be considered, as their primary concern lies with the words chosen by the judgment makers, not the intended meaning behind them. For instance, invariantism and contextualism tend to pay more attention to the consistency or conflict in the application of a word like “know(s)” across different contexts, which is used to ascribe an epistemic property to someone. While they acknowledge that the judgment makers are the ones making these epistemic judgments (e.g., “people ordinarily attribute such-and-such knowledge to the epistemic agent in question”), they seldom probe into motivations behind these choices. Once we shift our focus to consider the underlying reasons, or more specifically, the mental states that drive judgment makers to employ certain words and ascribe certain epistemic properties, we naturally align ourselves with the perspective of epistemic expressivism. This position emphasizes the crucial role of our conative attitudes in interpreting the epistemic discourse. Drawing on epistemic expressivism, we could distinguish between saying that we commonly believe that the epistemic agent in SA has ordinary knowledge and saying that we are motivated by some conative mental states to make this epistemic judgment. The former implies a non-conative mental state of belief, whereas the latter indicates an active presentation of our impressions to our interlocutors. Therefore, rather than viewing our epistemic judgment as merely a



description of the situation before us, namely, the epistemic status of S in SA, epistemic expressivism suggests that we are proposing our own unique interpretation of S's epistemic status in light of our considerations. In essence, in making these utterances, we do not only describe or represent the situation, but express a rather personal and active psychological state.

The perspective of epistemic expressivism offers an interesting approach to addressing the skeptic challenge without encountering the difficulties that invariantism and contextualism face. It posits that the difficulties arise from their overly literal and serious interpretation of epistemic judgments, to the point where they neglect the dynamic relationship between the judgment makers' thoughts and their expressions. What Chrisman provides is a more specific expressivist solution to the two problems at hand. Regarding the dialectical intuitions problem, he draws upon Gibbard's norm expressivism, proposing that while the knowledge claims in question are packaged under different operative epistemic standards and cannot directly conflict with each other, the addition of the judgment makers' selection and acceptance of those epistemic standards still gives rise to the expected contradiction. As for the *ad hoc* semantics problem, although expressivists also assume that judgment makers assert claims through an implicit psychological process unbeknownst to them, this does not impose a requirement that is as demanding as contextualism's. The reason is that it is far more palatable, to the extent that it does not seem *ad hoc*, to conceive of our judgment process as tacitly committing to a particular epistemic standard without awareness than to think of it as tacitly involving some concrete epistemic standards without noticing.<sup>1</sup>

However, taking an even broader perspective, using the same word in different contexts does not automatically imply either a uniform meaning or polysemy. Even if we employ identical words with the intention of conveying the same meaning in our sentences, it is still understandable that we might overlook subtle differences in their usage. Such an oversight can result in various consequences such as contradictory judgments, and various interpretations, like the contextualist's account, which is criticized as being *ad hoc*. Nevertheless, much like having differing opinions on taste does not necessarily constitute

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<sup>1</sup> Chrisman, "Epistemic Contextualism to Epistemic Expressivism," pp. 236-40.

a problem, contradictions arising from the subtle differences in word usage across contexts need not be seen as problematic either. Contextualists attempt to reconcile the contradictions observed in cross-context judgments by rationalizing those who make the judgments, as if it would be a defect for us not to acknowledge that, prior to making judgments, we are supposed to possess enough rationality to avoid any contradictions. This expectation, however, is unreasonably high. In reality, no one can be completely flawless in their reasoning, and more importantly, it is unnecessary for individuals to reach a state of perfect logical consistency before expressing their opinions. As expressivists argue, our expressions simply maintain a stable connection with certain mental states; and this does not inherently require a perfectly consistent semantic network. Therefore, the primary concern giving rise to the skeptical challenge — the phenomenon that philosophers find hard to accept and try to explain away — is understandable from the perspective of epistemic expressivism, and thus may not pose an unacceptable problem that demands a solution.

While it is comprehensible why we may make contradictory epistemic judgments, recognizing this fact does not completely resolve the discomfort caused by them. As discussed in the last chapter, our epistemic discourse often appears to produce and favor absolute answers, and this is at odds with contradictions. At this point, it is crucial to clarify that freeing ourselves from the compulsion to rationalize our epistemic judgments beforehand does not prevent us from rationalization. If we accept that we are naturally inclined towards making epistemic assertions, which are intended to be true, and that conflicting assertions cannot all be true, it follows that we will also tend to seek consistency in our epistemic assertions. In addition, if this pursuit of consistency has been beneficial to the growth of our epistemic discourse, we will have valid reasons to continue rationalizing our epistemic judgments. Looking from this aspect, the dialectical intuitions problem and the *ad hoc* semantics problem with contextualism do not essentially concern the plausibility of the contextualist solution. The issue is not that contextualism fails to accomplish its goal of portraying epistemic subjects participating in ordinary epistemic discourse as rational. Rather, what is problematic is its attempt to rationalize a wrong stage of our epistemic discourse — it is not the initial generation of conflicting epistemic judgments that needs rationalization, but the subsequent phase where we produce the temporary results of

epistemic judgements that are supposed to be rationalized.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the process of making epistemic judgments includes not only the act of “making epistemic judgments” in a typical sense, but also our reflection on and rationalization of these judgments, guiding them towards the desired, consistent outcomes.

At this point, one might wonder why contextualists put so much emphasis on the stage of “making epistemic judgments” and leave little room for its subsequent development. This, once again, likely stems from the prevailing presumption of accessible epistemic facts. Some readers may have noticed that one contributing factor to the *ad hoc* semantics problem is the analogy drawn between, put crudely, two kinds of properties: the descriptive kind (“flat”) and the normative kind (“know(s)”). We naturally use “flat” in a contextualist or relativist way, but extending this understanding to knowledge attributions feels less intuitive, thereby rendering the contextualist’s response to skepticism seem forced. Nevertheless, now that we have realized that contextualists might focus on an incorrect phase of our epistemic evaluation process, it follows that the stage where they make the analogy might also need a reconsideration. This is to say, while contextualists are criticized for the fluid shift in our meaning when using terms like “flat” across different contexts not providing an accurate analogy for understanding our varying use of terms like “know(s),” the problem may not reside in making the analogy itself. Instead, the issue could be that the support for the contextualists’ conclusion actually relies on an analogy that should, from the outset, be made at a later stage in the process. Indeed, there does not appear to be any inherent obstacle preventing us from thinking that our assertions about something being “flat” are made in the same manner that we attribute knowledge to others.<sup>2</sup> It seems that what allows us to more naturally accept that things are not absolutely flat also arises in the phase subsequent to our initial ascription of properties; that is, we can explain the relativity of flatness to other people using clear references. Such a facility does not

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<sup>1</sup> For illustrative purposes, consider Sellars’ proposal: “while the correctness of this statement about Jones requires that Jones could *now* cite prior particular facts as evidence for the idea that these utterances *are* reliable indicators, it requires only that it is correct to say that Jones *now* knows, thus remember, that these particular facts did obtain. It does not require that it be correct to say that at the time these facts *did* obtain he *then knew* them to obtain. And the regress disappears.” (Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, p. 77.)

<sup>2</sup> This may potentially lead to a globalization of expressivism.

seem as readily available when it comes to knowledge attributions. After all, descriptive properties are determined by the objects they describe within a given context and are thus heavily dependent on it. In contrast, normative properties are influenced more by subjects or are derived in light of abstract standards and are therefore less reliant on contextual elements. This distinction effectively explains why it is considerably more challenging to account for the variability in attributing normative properties than it is for descriptive properties. More importantly, it might also elucidate why, considering their tacit commitment to the existence of relevant normative facts, contextualists could be inclined to suggest treating normative property ascription like descriptive property ascription — If there are accessible epistemic facts, then it is only natural to seek similar referential support, which already proves beneficial in the descriptive case.

This preliminary explanation may seem sound, though a full validation of it falls beyond the scope of our current discussion. The key point to note here is that philosophers often display a strong inclination to account for our attribution of normative properties in the same way that we attribute descriptive properties. This inclination is not inherently problematic, for there is no essential difficulty in treating these two different types of properties similarly. However, there remains a further questioning of why they are inclined to do so — that is, except for their tacit realist presumption, is there a further motivation for them to do so? After all, regardless of how strong their tacit commitment is, this inclination seems to directly lead to one of the weak points of the contextualist proposal, namely, the *ad hoc* semantics problem. As was just presented, the core of this problem, could be understood as that we have a reference point when talking about “flatness,” but not in the case of “knowledge” — that is, we have facts to rely upon for clarifying and making sense of what “flat” expresses. While it could be argued that most people may not possess the necessary information to realize that they are using “flat” in a context-dependent way, it is “natural” enough for them to accept a shift in the way to view their own assertions (as we saw in the bakery case in Chapter 2). The explanation for this perspective shift may vary, but at least one approach is to suppose that facts show that “flat” should not be used non-relatively. Contrarily, in discussions concerning “knowledge,” no such contrasting facts are available and, consequently, a similar plausible account and a similar rational thought process cannot be formulated.

The efforts put in drawing the analogy may remind readers of our earlier discussion of realists' attempt in the last chapter. The key similarity lies in the idea that since the approach to understanding "flatness" works well, if contextualists can identify similar elements in our discussions of "knowledge," they could potentially construct a comparable successful narrative to account for knowledge ascription. Thus, the response to this further questioning appears to be that the risk taken in relying on the analogy with "flat" discussions is meant to rationalize the phenomenon of our knowledge attributions. That being the case, rather than being a separate issue, the *ad hoc* semantics problem appears to be another facet of the dialectical intuitions problem. The latter problem, at its core, is about the common anticipation that we could pick out the same instance of knowledge ascription across varying contexts and recognize its continuity even when our viewpoints change. This is essentially one of the phenomena that epistemologists may attempt to account for, but it cannot be simultaneously explained alongside the contextualist solution to the skeptics' challenge from SA. By contrast, the *ad hoc* semantics problem pertains to the way that contextualists make this account — if the knowledge-flat analogy holds, then the challenge posed by SA regarding contradictory epistemic judgments is addressed. Moreover, if the analogy is robust enough, it might even provide a reason for us to weaken the intuition that gives rise to the dialectical intuitions problem. After all, we do find it reasonable that judgments regarding "flatness" are restricted to their specific contexts and not universally valid.

As with epistemic realism, here epistemic facts once again play a dual role. They are not only what epistemic judgments are supposed to capture, but also what underpins the rationality of making such judgments. What is interesting, however, is that we have argued that the problem of the analogy involves being drawn at the wrong stage. Even though the original need for this analogy has been dismissed, could an analogy constructed at the correct stage offer some fresh insights? It appears so. The key premise for successfully ascribing descriptive properties hinges on the existence of corresponding, accessible facts. Nevertheless, this premise can only have an impact when it is put to use. In reality, people may ascribe descriptive properties without ever realizing that their judgments might be imprecise. Still, they could naturally shift their perspective and accept the flaw in their judgments when pointed out by others. And it is at the stage when we try

to rationalize our attributions of descriptive properties that this premise becomes crucial. In other words, even though relevant facts are already present, they only come into play in our account when we seek to rationalize our property ascription. For example, we might make sense of property discussions by assuming that people implicitly qualify their claims in advance to adhere to corresponding facts. It follows that the step of rationalization is not intrinsically linked to the facts themselves, even though facts effectively serve as a warranty for rationality as desired. If the analogy is supposed to be drawn at this stage from the very beginning, what is essentially needed for contextualists' account of our normative property ascription is not some sort of factual counterpart *per se*, but rather something that could serve the same purpose.

And it is at this juncture that epistemic expressivism, as we currently understand it, demonstrates its strength. According to epistemic expressivism, although normative properties are not descriptive properties (or, at least, there is no proof showing that they are), their attributions can still be rationalized in a similar manner. Despite the absence of corresponding facts to rely on, we do have the subjects who are attributing these properties at our disposal. These subjects can make sense of how corresponding terms are used in different contexts and take responsibility for doing so. And it is indeed their actions that result in genuine disagreements with each other, arguments to justify their own property ascription, and more. With the inclusion of subjects making epistemic judgments, epistemic expressivism can fulfill the role of contextualism. It can explain why we might assume different epistemic standards are at play in the context of skeptical arguments and in ordinary situations, thereby resolving the challenge from SA. At the same time, it more naturally preserves our intuitions of ordinary epistemic discourse, which suppose that we may disagree with others and attribute epistemic features without noticing implicit contextual limitations. In this way, epistemic expressivism enjoys the benefits of the contextualist account and avoids its problems. It offers a more advantageous response to the skeptical challenge compared to both contextualism and invariantism, which is behind the common solutions to the Gettier problem. As such, the epistemic expressivist treatment broadens its application to our understanding of a wide range of concepts, providing its perspective on various epistemological studies.

Viewing epistemic expressivism's advantage over contextualism as supplying something that contextualism aims to provide but fails to, once again, evidently echoes our earlier comparison between epistemic expressivism and epistemic realism, which suggests that the former is capable of furnishing something the latter aspires but fails to deliver. While there is a subtle difference — the current revelation does not necessarily rely on presuming that contextualism tacitly makes an epistemic realist commitment, as epistemic expressivism performs better in addressing a more concrete issue that does not necessarily concern accessible epistemic facts directly — what is crucial is that, irrespective of whether epistemic facts are considered, the role that epistemic expressivism attempts to play appears to be a better replacement for the existing account of our epistemic linguistic practice. If the reasoning in this subsection is sound, then our explicit line of thought serves not only as an alternative to the traditional position of epistemic realism — one that does not face the same difficulty concerning epistemic facts but fares at least as well as epistemic realism on specific issues — it now also has a general theoretical advantage regarding the skeptic challenge, a problem both traditional thinking and a significant competing theoretical position face.

The development here shows again how our discussions are closely connected. When epistemic expressivism offers a comprehensive solution to a significant epistemological issue, it, on the one hand, provides an account for our epistemic discourse; on the other hand, naturally influences our understanding of a variety of epistemic notions, including our conception of wisdom. Considering the conclusion drawn from the first section, it points to a radically innovative interpretation of both the concept of wisdom and our epistemic discourse in terms of our pursuit of wisdom. However, at the same time, the connection also implies that the alignment cannot escape from the lingering question posed by the implicit line of thought of this dissertation: Is our alternative — or in this case, replacement — position as reliable as its opponents, assuming they are fully developed as intended?

## **2.2 Addressing the Challenge**

### **2.2.1 The External Perspective**

As stated in the previous chapter, it is not feasible to address all potential objections to epistemic expressivism. However, for our line of thought, there emerges one particularly challenging problem: We appear to exhibit a kind of optimistic outlook towards the future, almost taking for granted the success of our endeavor to construct epistemic discourse without a preset blueprint — but, what if this approach were to fail? After all, our approach may not achieve the same level of certainty that realism could obtain if its assumptions prove to be valid. Now, with the alignment drawn in the previous section, we can delve deeper into the complexities of this problem.

Treating the construction of epistemic discourse as an evolving process postpones the juncture at which we decide what our epistemic discourse is ultimately about. However, this is not to say that it is not about anything. Even without a predefined objective, our epistemic discourse and other practices will inevitably lead us somewhere. Ideally, this destination should be what satisfies our profound epistemic desires— that is, the highest or the most prized epistemic good, which may be referred to as wisdom in many people’s mind. But conceptualizing wisdom in this way more or less risks turning it into a placeholder, as it does not seem to provide any concrete information for us to spell out what wisdom is. In the first section, an interpretation of the concept of wisdom was offered in some detail, thanks to the guidance of the epistemological tradition of veritism. Yet, when we examined the relationship between defining wisdom (as what a virtuous inquirer would pursue) and identifying the fundamental epistemic good, things became more complicated. Perhaps the most difficult question is the one that was raised at the end of the first section: Following the radical interpretation of theorizing epistemic value from the perspective of idealized epistemic agents, what, at the end of the day, is truly final and fundamental? Answering this question is just as difficult as it seems. Although one might argue that the question is too abstract to handle, the real challenge within the epistemic expressivist line of thought lies in the possible absence of any answer at all. To address such a question, we must assume that there is a discoverable fact about where epistemic value derives from, and whether epistemic value exists or not. And these assumptions are as questionable as other claims about epistemic facts pursued by mainstream epistemologists. While we do value many things in epistemology, we struggle when trying to locate a tangible epistemic fact about what is finally epistemologically valuable.



For our current purposes, there is no need to entirely defend this idea, as in philosophy, fully affirming or refuting a view is not only extremely difficult but also frequently misses the point. Even if we become convinced that the true difficulty in the abstract issues surrounding epistemic value is the absence of a corresponding epistemic fact to rely upon, it will not prevent people, philosophers in particular, from pondering what is most valuable and fundamentally valuable in epistemology. What is more important is that, regardless of whether such concerns are genuinely significant or non-significant, many would likely agree, at least to some extent, that these concerns are somewhat beneficial. Therefore, the real challenge in applying our line of thinking to the value problem of epistemology, and wisdom from this perspective, is not how it could be definitively defended, but rather how to comprehend the sense made in the process of discussing these relevant issues. In other words, we need to figure out how to accommodate the common and sensible intuitions that we find in epistemology within the epistemic expressivist framework. And, in our context, the most prominent intuition that needs reevaluation is the one that we have attempted to rely on — the veritist tradition.

It was established in the first section that veritism, in its general sense that truth is the fundamental epistemic good, holds a relatively accepted position in epistemology (despite some recent challenges that are said to be resolvable). It was also noted that as long as truth is viewed as one of the ultimate (but not “the” ultimate) valuable elements of epistemology, this more restrained opinion is difficult to contest. As Michael P. Lynch observes, “[i]t is true beliefs we have in mind when we say that truth is an epistemic goal. That is, believing what is true is a proper end of inquiry.”<sup>1</sup> However, if we invert the defining order between the end of virtuous inquiry and the aim of veritic desire, we would be much less certain about how to make sure that it is still truth that virtuous inquirers are supposed to pursue. After all, for ordinary people, there appears to be “no constraints on what one’s epistemological goals ought to be: nothing makes it wrong for a person not to care about achieving truth and avoiding falsehood, but care only about adopting beliefs that will make him feel good about his cultural origins.”<sup>2</sup> This issue presents itself in two ways:

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<sup>1</sup> Michael P. Lynch, "Truth, Value and Epistemic Expressivism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 79, no. 1 (2009): p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Hartry Field, *Truth and the Absence of Fact* (Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 384-85.

On the one hand, even though virtuous inquirers are idealized versions of ordinary epistemic agents, without a commonly agreed direction to unify what actually serves as the ultimate epistemic goal, it remains difficult to discern what that ultimate epistemic goal would be in the idealized situation. On the other hand, while we seem to have a widely accepted understanding of veritism, upon closer scrutiny, it is hard to maintain a confident attitude about its certainty. These are just two aspects of the same issue, which is, in the end, the problem mentioned at the conclusion of Chapter 2: There is no external perspective allowing us to give an objective answer to epistemic questions.

As our discussion develops, this problem is now presented in front of us at three levels: First, since what we are concentrating on is the concept of wisdom as an epistemic notion, our questions about wisdom are also affected and have no objective answers that are ready to be discovered. Second, as we explore the possibility of considering wisdom as the fundamental epistemic good that all of us, who are supposed to admire virtuous inquirers, should pursue, we now confront the problem of a vague definition that fails to offer any useful information of what wisdom is. And third, if we ultimately cannot provide a definitive answer, then our discussions of the temporarily satisfying answers appear futile, making the seriousness and relevance of our efforts seem misplaced when all things are considered. The first worry could be momentarily set aside as it was proposed in the last chapter that we have a practical reason to accept what we can learn from our epistemic discourse. Around the same time, it was also foreshadowed that we have a solution to address the genuine concern behind the second worry, which then leads to the third worry. This last worry is not only theoretically bothersome as it cannot account for the intuition that epistemological research is significant, but it also has practical implications. If we find no point in continuing our practice of epistemic discourse, we will no longer be motivated to participate in it, leading to the decline of both the practice itself and the practical reason that is justified by its fruitfulness. Now, with the stage set, let us delve into the resolution of these worries.

It is important to note that, in our earlier discussion, the problem of the external perspective was mainly framed as a lack of this perspective. This is to view the external perspective primarily as something that can provide an objective guarantee that most people are inclined to ground their viewpoints in. Such an interpretation is usually not what

other philosophers have in mind when they use a similar term. But, in any case, in our current context, the pressing concern behind this absence is that how the internal perspective — through which we engage with normative discourse — could be preserved when the external perspective is not only separated from it, but also fails to be substantiated. In Timmons's words:

From a morally detached perspective, one uses 'true' and 'false' in such a way that a statement counts as true (false) if, and only if, it is correctly assertible (correctly deniable) solely by virtue of the operative first-order semantic norms, plus the world.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of how the external perspective comes into being, "people can and do judge the truth of moral statements from within a morally engaged perspective, and in these more ordinary contexts, the use of 'true' runs in tandem with the object-level discourse."<sup>2</sup> This latter, ordinary situation is where the so-called internal perspective is employed. Such a perspective enables us to act in a commonly accepted fashion and our ethical convictions to be formed, referred to, and exchanged. There is rarely any strange feeling involved in taking the employment and acceptance of the internal perspective for granted; even those who argue against the legitimacy of relying on moral discourse will have to admit that this is how people behave or act in ordinary life. What is peculiar does not come from adopting such a perspective, but from reflection on how the adoption is supposed to be justified. And this is where the former consideration comes into play — when we further consider why we have any reason to utilize the internal perspective, as most people unreflectively do in everyday life, the so-called external perspective is invoked to assess how well our moral discourse is supported. The truth is that our moral expressions often take the form of standard assertions, in the sense that they are typically declarative sentences uttered in an affirmative way, which allow us to construct more complex expressions, such as exclamations of feelings, demands for others, etc. Therefore, it would be intuitively

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<sup>1</sup> Timmons, *Morality without Foundations*, pp. 150. As Timmons himself admits, "the detached perspective" and "the engaged perspective" are not entirely satisfying terminology. (ibid., p. 150.) My use of "the external/internal perspective" attempts to cover "the detached/engaged perspective." However, it should be noted that my interpretation differs both from Timmons' usage of the latter pair of terms and from Cuneo's original application of the former.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

appealing for us to account for our use of moral assertions in the same way as we do when it comes to assertions used in discourses of other domains. However, assertions are obviously more typically used to describe or represent what is in the world, as it would be much more certain to state whether what we say is true or false when it is about what is objectively there. And this is where the external perspective and the internal perspective may diverge. As irrealism cannot accept the idea that our moral, or more broadly, normative assertions can correspond to anything that is ultimately objective, it would be nonsensical to account for the internal perspective in the same way as typical assertions — which is to say, we can attribute “true” or “false” to the sentence in question depending on whether it corresponds to a particular state of affairs. Normative assertions can be true or false in a minimalist sense (from the engaged perspective, as they are typically intended to be true), in a relativist or other conceivable senses (from the disengaged perspective, when the force of claiming to be categorically true is lessened or deprived), but not in the sense shared by factual assertions, which are true as they correspond to certain states of affairs. Consequently, while we have to acknowledge that our normative discourse proceeds in the way that we participate through the engaged perspective, we must resist the temptation to align the results that we obtain when we stay detached from the engaged perspective with what is appealing from the latter perspective.

Understood in this way, “the external perspective” is present whenever there is a need to validate our actual participation in normative discourses. It is just not explicitly separated from the actual engagement and is thus invoked when normative assertions are treated in exactly the same way as typical assertions (as realists do), for there will then be no need to account for the discourse in question from two distinct perspectives. Nevertheless, the introduction of this standpoint is not merely to highlight that there is a gap between what we tacitly commit to in ordinary life and what we should be aware of when we calm down and consider the issue from a more “objective” point of view. Rather, there is a specific need to bring it up: Timmons, among many other philosophers, posits that there are two tasks of accommodation that a metaethicist is supposed to fulfill:

First, there is the task of situating moral discourse within a broadly naturalistic picture of human nature and society. After all, even if moral discourse does not involve (or should not be taken to involve) realist metaphysical and epistemological commitments, there is still the task of making sense of that discourse — of

explaining its point and purpose —from within a naturalistic/evolutionary picture of human beings.<sup>1</sup>

And

the task of accommodation also looks to ordinary moral discourse and practice, and requires that a plausible metaethical view accommodate (as well as possible) the essential features and deeply embedded assumptions of such discourse and practice.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, metaethical theorization is often expected to provide an account of our moral discourse that makes it sensible simultaneously from two perspectives: a broader one that encompasses the phenomenon of moral practices, which is the world understood in a naturalistic way; and a more particular one rooted in the actual conduct of these practices, which is how things about morality appear to ordinary people. In the previous chapter, I questioned whether the value of such desiderata to actual practice, especially when they are combined, might be overstated. That being said, it seems that the main advantage and disadvantage of realism correspond to these two perspectives — Realism appears promising when supporting the meaningfulness of our actual moral practices but faces trouble when it comes to locating the basis of its assertions within the natural world. Applying this dual perspective to epistemology, we can identify two corresponding desiderata for metaepistemological theorization, as well as the corresponding strengths and weaknesses found in epistemic realism. By contrast, our line of thought performs better in the latter respect, for it is not as theoretically burdened as realism with the need to base its theorization on the elusive existence of epistemic facts. There may not even be any need

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. These tasks correspond to the two desiderata of metaethical theorization: “D<sub>1</sub> A plausible metaethical view should comport with deeply embedded presumptions of ordinary moral discourse and practice. This guides the project of internal accommodation. D<sub>2</sub> A plausible metaethical view should comport with plausible general views and assumptions from other relevant areas of inquiry. This guides the project of external accommodation.” (ibid., p. 12.)

More specifically, the extent to which D<sub>1</sub> is satisfied, and thus the merit of a metaethical view, depends on how the following assumptions are addressed: “C<sub>1</sub> Some moral judgments (beliefs, sentences) are true or correct. C<sub>2</sub> Error in moral judgment (belief) is possible — one can make mistakes. Thus, improvements in one’s moral outlook are possible; one can make moral progress. C<sub>3</sub> Genuine conflicts in moral judgment and belief are possible. For example, normally, if one person affirms and another person denies a moral judgment, then they do disagree, and (again, normally) at least one of them is mistaken (has made an error in moral judgment).” (ibid., p. 76.)

to put extra effort in elaborating on how epistemic expressivism can fulfill the external accommodation, as it already derives from a natural source within our grasp.

The remaining crucial point here hinges on whether we should assume that epistemic expressivism is inferior to epistemic realism in the former respect. What might immediately come into readers' mind could be the assumption that epistemic expressivism should perform equally well, or even better than epistemic realism. As Timmons's comments, "any metaethical theory that can accomplish both accommodation aims is more plausible than one that cannot."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, according to Timmons, "[t]he moral irrealist, by contrast, supposedly has an easy time with the metaphysical and epistemological commitments of her view; the real work for the irrealist is in plausibly accommodating various features and assumptions embedded in ordinary moral discourse and practice and, in particular, the ones that seem to indicate that the discourse is, in some sense, objective."<sup>2</sup> In other words, irrealist projects essentially depend on the distinct external perspective.<sup>3</sup> As Cuneo has noted when commenting on one version of expressivism: "I believe that minimalists are correct to emphasize that something like perspectivalism of this sort is necessary to state their position."<sup>4</sup> Granted, what Cuneo targets is a position that:

On the one hand, minimalists aspire to capture and vindicate the realist-seeming appearances of ordinary epistemic thought and discourse. On the other hand, they want to remain distinctively antirealist by not committing themselves to an ontology of epistemic facts with all its attendant problems. The minimalist solution is to appeal to perspectives with regard to the epistemic domain.<sup>5</sup>

The direct target here may appear limited, yet these two desiderata are more general and can be applied to other versions of epistemic expressivism. Lynch, in his argument against epistemic expressivism, claims that "whatever we might say in the moral case, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> It might be interesting to note that the system for us to assess knowledge is frequently different from the one used to evaluate one's actions and behaviors, as in the former case we usually rely more on standardized tests than on defining knowledge, whereas in the latter case standardization is usually viewed inherently flawed. However, this does not seem to constitute an irresolvable factual difference between issues of these two domains.

<sup>4</sup> Cuneo, *Normative Web*, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

epistemically disengaged standpoint is an illusion.”<sup>1</sup> The way Lynch argues against epistemic expressivism is contending that it is impossible to envision an inquiry that does not center on the pursuit of truth.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, since a disengaged standpoint would allow for such an inquiry, it is impossible to ever attain this standpoint that epistemic expressivism requires, making the latter senseless. This argument may raise some doubts. For instance, why would the view of truth as a non-essential goal of inquiry make epistemic expressivism completely non-viable? Even if it is unacceptable for any inquiry not to aim at truth, epistemic expressivism may still preserve its sensibility on other issues. As long as epistemologists are entitled to find other topics sufficiently epistemologically interesting, it seems unfair to exclude epistemic expressivism from being adopted in these topics just because it falls short in regard to (one of) inquiry’s supposed end(s). More importantly, as discussed in the last chapter, that our epistemic discourse does not have to presuppose the Ontic Thesis. Therefore, even just from the internal perspective, it is not impossible for us to be uncertain about the factual nature of our epistemic discourse as metaepistemological realists might assume (recall that we can talk about our preference over taste with certain realist-seeming appearances).

Perhaps another way to see the crux of Lynch’s argument is aligning it with our discussion of epistemological theorization. If epistemic expressivism does not understand our epistemic judgments initially from the external truth that they are supposed to capture, but essentially as certain expressions of our mental states, then even if a deflationist account of normative truth is adopted, it is difficult to conceive truth as the primary goal (or at least one of the primary goals) in epistemic norms as it is in the veritist tradition. The problem is not that it could be otherwise. In fact, many theorists have argued against veritism on different grounds and to varying extent. For example, Mark Kaplan suggests that knowledge and inquiry can be separated, and the goal of inquiry is not to gain knowledge itself, but to justify the belief already held.<sup>3</sup> And even if we shift our focus to justification,

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch, "Truth, Value and Epistemic Expressivism," p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> The pursuit of truth is spelled out by Lynch as "(TG): It is prima facie good that, relative to the propositions one might consider, one believe all and only those that are true." (ibid., p. 78.)

<sup>3</sup> Mark Kaplan, "It's Not What You Know That Counts," *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 7 (1985).

there is no unified understanding of what it amounts to. According to William P. Alston, we desire different things when it comes to epistemic justification. He lists six out of them: we expect epistemic justification to (i) lay a foundation for beliefs; (ii) transfer truth to beliefs; (iii) be epistemically accessible; (iv) form higher-order cognition of the agent's reasons; (v) make the agent's belief system coherent; and (vi) satisfy the requirements of intellectual duty.<sup>1</sup> Some of these desiderata obviously overlap or even contradict each other, and epistemologists seem unable to provide a unified answer as to which desideratum should take precedence. Alston further points out that studies addressing the Gettier problem fail because they presume that there is only one pre-theoretical concept of epistemic justification to be analyzed, but such a concept does not exist.<sup>2</sup> However, regardless of whether these challenges are powerful enough or not, it is undeniable that our epistemic discourse has largely developed on the basic acceptance of veritism. Rejecting it inevitably leads to a substantial rethinking of a significant portion of received epistemological thoughts. This is not only theoretically demanding, which many philosophers might already consider defective, but also conflicts with the practical reason that we find plausible. Nevertheless, while it seems sensible to continue along the main path that our tradition indicates simply on this practical ground, the latter does not appear to function in the way of a typical external perspective.

One might argue that the contribution from a practical justification differs significantly from the support offered by a typical external perspective. As Lynch notes, our inability to abstract away from our epistemic processes “doesn't mean there are philosophical facts. It only means we must think that there are.”<sup>3</sup> That is, it signifies our need to believe in them — “we can't seem to help thinking that there are at least some objective values, the values that constitute our very understanding of objectivity.”<sup>4</sup> And this is the kind of backing that one would normally hope to obtain. This may lead us to

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<sup>1</sup> William P. Alston, "Epistemic Desiderata," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53, no. 3 (1993): pp. 528-30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 535-36.

<sup>3</sup> Lynch, "Truth, Value and Epistemic Expressivism," p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



reconsider the issue at hand: Instead of questioning whether epistemic expressivism can make it possible for an external perspective to exist (a requirement not necessarily implied by the two desiderata), we could ask whether it can successfully preserve the sensibility of our epistemic linguistic practice in an ordinarily expected manner.

Once we approach the issue from this angle, we will soon realize that the irrealist treatment of the external perspective essentially aligns with that of the realists. This is because, despite their differing understandings of the external perspective, both camps try to account for the internal perspective utilizing an “objective” perspective. Although a kind of “insulating” function may not initially appear to be a typical form of support, we could view the primary purpose of distinguishing the internal perspective from the external perspective as to protect the ordinary epistemic discourse from the potentially compromising naturalistic influences of the external perspective. From this standpoint, it would be misleading to accept Timmons’ diagnosis of expressivism’s problem — that “it is with the project of internal accommodation that the irrealist finds her stiffest challenge.”<sup>1</sup> — at face value. While philosophers like Timmons, who are dedicated to making sense of our normative practices as realists do, certainly deserve recognition for their efforts, the core issue here concerns not only the internal perspective, but also the external perspective: If we concede that the external perspective is not a valid presumption, the consequence would be that epistemic expressivism becomes unable to shield the internal perspective from naturalistic elements, and our engagement in the normative discourse will then become vulnerable to naturalistic interpretations, being directly cast into a world where it not only struggles to find firm grounding, but may also be accused of this very struggle. In other words, the isolation of the external perspective effectively contributes to accommodating the internal perspective, as it ensures that the internal perspective is not affected by the naturalistic interpretation and can independently accommodate its own elements. Nevertheless, this maneuver is not bringing in the type of support that is most anticipated.

The lack of the expected external perspective, or less controversially, the lack of an ultimate confirmation of the legitimacy of our normative discourses, becomes especially

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<sup>1</sup> Timmons, *Morality without Foundations*, p. 158.

noticeable when considering how people can have genuine normative disagreements. There is no problem in understanding, say, that “[m]oral disagreements, according to [Timmon’s] brand of irrealism, are disagreements in moral stance.”<sup>1</sup> We can accept that we have differing opinions on normative issues, and these opinions are stably connected to certain psychological states, resulting in deep normative disagreements that are profoundly tied to various normative stances. We can find it straightforward to comprehend how individuals can base their reasoning on a particular outlook<sup>2</sup> that perhaps only they themselves take for granted and make categorical assertions as if they occupy the correct normative positions. We can even compare and learn a great deal from different people’s distinct outlooks. The process should be easy to imagine, for even comparing different people’s tastes can lead to new and interesting insights. It is also not challenging to see how one might change their stances or outlooks over time, in much the same way that they might switch their preference from one flavor of soda to another (changing one’s taste, after all, is hard). The issue, in the end, lies again in understanding the legitimacy of adopting such a basis — that is, ultimately, how we can be satisfied by accepting one normative outlook over another.

At this juncture, our examination seems to have reached an impasse, unable to progress beyond the consideration of how to satisfy ordinary intuitions. However, one interesting aspect of the issue above may introduce some fresh ideas. That is, there exists a common phenomenon: It seems that we tend to be uncertain about our moral, epistemic, or other normative outlooks that we take for granted, especially when we are questioned. On the one hand, we may doubt our own judgments, even those we assert confidently in most situations. On the other hand, such doubts are not typically considered negative. In fact, saying things like “It might be the case that I am wrong on this one.” does not only sound natural, but also gives the impression of humility and politeness in many contexts,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> “Typically, one’s moral outlook is a complex matter that includes: (1) having a developed sensitivity to various features of one’s environment that, according to the outlook in question, are morally relevant features and, so, the basis of moral evaluation; (2) having various emotional responses in connection with objects of evaluation, for example, experiencing feelings of guilt and resentment toward certain of one’s own actions and the actions of others; (3) being acquainted with certain exemplars, that is, paradigmatic cases of moral and immoral actions, persons, institutions, and so forth; (4) having learned various moral generalizations that encapsulate the most morally relevant features to which one has a developed sensitivity; and (5) having learned basic patterns of moral reasoning, for instance, golden rule/reversibility reasoning, as well as learning to reason from moral generalizations to particular cases.” (ibid., p. 139.)

even enhancing the speaker's image. There are many instances where we concede that normative issues cannot be resolved by ourselves, thereby acknowledging the potential for error in our beliefs. But if we find it impossible to contrast our viewpoints with an external reference (in the realist proposal, objective normative facts), admitting the potential for mistakes in normative judgments could become senseless, or just a gesture of courtesy. After all, it would be meaningless for us to stay humble on relevant matters if there is no measurement for us to assess our judgments. To the realist, this appears to be a challenge that demands a response admitting the emergence of a concrete worry. Nevertheless, even in scenarios where there is nothing substantial to be concerned about, we might still have similar (or even exactly the same) concern regarding uncertainty. For instance, when we are alone in a distant, dark field, we may naturally fear the existence of ghosts, monsters, and things alike. We may not believe in stories about imagined ghosts or monsters in normal situation, but since the stakes in this scenario are high (a pragmatic encroachment case indeed), we would naturally become more reserved in definitively asserting that such entities could not possibly be there (if we do have confidence in ordinary contexts). The key point here is not about if most people are brave or innocent (whatever people would like to think about the characters in the example) like this and have their judgment influenced in this way, but that it is just normal and natural for us to display reservation when faced with pressing issues. Even if we perform on stage after multiple rehearsals, for whatever reason there might be (potential public embarrassment, etc.), we are excused to remain reserved whether or not there is anything to be worried about in reality. That is to say, hesitance to assert absolute certainty in normative claims need not depend on the existence of a better or a more accurate norm for us to follow. Consequently, this concern does not necessarily evolve into a problem for epistemic expressivism to solve in the first place.

Interestingly, Timmons has also drawn attention to a similar issue. Although he primarily focuses on the case of modal statements,<sup>1</sup> he realizes that this is a less severe

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<sup>1</sup> I am including Timmons's concern regarding the former respect in a more general concern. However, it should be noted that what Timmons focuses on here is how to "make good sense of certain modal claims that express the kind of non-dogmatic openness one normally has toward one's current moral views-claims like: 'Some of my current moral beliefs might be mistaken or false' and 'My current view about abortion might be mistaken.'" (ibid., p. 167.)

manifestation of a broader problem that could present itself in a more pressing form. Both versions of the problem share a common way of approaching, as they are both concerned with anti-dogmatism. That is, what we are considering here is in fact another aspect of the same old problem — the problem of the possibility of deep moral error. Timmons' proposed treatment for both versions of the problem is to perceive it as a matter of accounting for the improbability of our moral outlook. His solution to the first version highlights how we can make an evolutionary transition from one moral outlook to another, like repairing and constructing Neurath's boat.<sup>1</sup> However, such a revision of moral outlook might not only take the form of a gradual progression but can also take the form of a more sudden change, akin to a moral conversion. In this scenario, we suddenly abandon the entirety of our old moral outlook and place our faith in a new one, leading to the extremized version of the problem that raises the concerns for discontinuity. Apparently, such discontinuity does not automatically imply that no improvement can be made, and Timmons' solution should still be applicable. Nonetheless, this then invites a familiar concern:

The realist critic wants me to tell a story about error that would directly address the question, '*In virtue of what* is a moral sentence mistaken, erroneous, or false?'<sup>2</sup>

If one has already accepted the possibility that there may not exist any normative facts in the strong sense that realists would want to rely on, it would not be hard to also recognize the presumption of such facts underlying this mode of questioning, which can lead to begging the question. However, we must still admit, in some sense, that realists are posing a valuable question. Timmons interprets this question as one to be addressed by considering the improbability of morality. Yet, during the discussion in this chapter, we have emphasized that people not only seek an answer but a satisfying one. That is to say, the importance of posing this question is that if we aim to make sense of what people actually do, we need not only to provide a plausible explanation, but also an explanation that is assuring and satisfying. Indeed, in the space not occupied by facts, we have numerous methods to attempt various explanations that may seem rational. This has been

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

the work of many philosophers for a long time, namely, providing an account for our engaged perspective in normative discourse. And it may understandably give rise to two considerations: On the one hand, whether these explanations are sufficient and, on the other hand, whether these explanations are necessary. So far, we have seen many debates focusing on the former, but what about the latter? Our rational demand for these explanations is natural, but it is not irrevocable, unchangeable, or undeniable. Many philosophers believe that satisfying this rational demand is part of their job (or responsibility), but this does not imply that this work is necessary. Of course, most jobs in the world are similar in this respect, as they more or less struggle to justify their inherent necessity, and thus pursuing this question may not seem enticing. Nevertheless, there is a related aspect that is indeed of interest: Many philosophers assume that it is their task to fulfill this work in line with the natural direction of this rational demand, and it is this assumption that is truly up for questioning.

Responding to a need can take on many different forms. We all have various natural tendencies, and we can address them in diverse ways that we prefer. Consider, for example, our childhood. Many people share the same experience of craving sweets and fancy objects, to the extent that we could be easily lured by bad people using these things to attract us. We may also experience fear in unfamiliar situations, losing control over our own bodies, regardless of whether there is in reality anything harmful. These are all perfectly normal natural inclinations, yet we generally do not believe that they should be indulged without restriction. Instead, we usually consider it right to educate children on how to moderate their cravings and stay safe from strangers. We tend to teach children how to manage or overcome their fear, observe their environment calmly, be brave and adopt suitable strategies to cope with possible challenges. Without intervention from adults, children may not be aware that these natural inclinations are potentially problematic, until they receive negative feedback in practice (such as being lured away by bad people and consequently living a miserable life or being laughed at because of stage fright). Nevertheless, before negative consequences take place, if we ask these children why they like to eat or why they feel scared, they could have their own reasons to support their actions or behaviors and anticipate that their choices are justified and understood. In fact, if we had not foreseen the potential harm of these natural tendencies, i.e., the consequences that are undesirable, we

would not regard them as negative and requiring correction. Therefore, without taking into account the practical impact, there seems to be nothing inherently unreasonable about these children's performances, as long as they can provide reasons by themselves.

We can consider another example where some children may exhibit exceptional confidence, which, objectively speaking, has no proper grounding. In the eyes of adults, there may appear to be no reason for being so confident. However, given that optimism and self-confidence often contribute to a happier life for children, we may still search for reasons to support this extra confidence, such as linking it to behaviors that we view as achievements to rationalize it. That being said, if we encounter some other children who perform similar actions, but do not display the same level of disproportionate confidence, are we going to judge them irrational? Typically, no, we would not consider this opposite case as indicative of a flaw. This introduces a significant asymmetry, suggesting that we can respond quite differently to the same type of natural tendency. And, evidently, here it is primarily the differing potential practical outcomes, rather than the reasonable explanation *per se* that is influencing our judgment.

The purpose of these examples is to illustrate a possible relationship between observable phenomena and our interpretation of them. The first interesting thing to learn here is that when we respond to a natural inclination, which, in our context is participating in normative discourse, the main aim of this response might be to aid in better carrying out practical activities, with providing explanations not necessarily being the only method to fulfill this aim. Indeed, as was touched on in the final section of the previous chapter, while it might not be essential to preserve our epistemic discourse, inducing an existential crisis in it through our theoretical reflection does not intuitively seem like a favorable outcome. Rather, it seems more desirable to provide theoretical support for our epistemic discourse, which currently appears to be thriving, giving it an adequate reason to continue. The second point to note, on the other hand, is that while offering an explanation might serve to support the ongoing normative linguistic and other practices, or more specifically, our epistemic discourse, it may not necessarily provide the sufficient reason that we tend to seek.

Drawing from our previous discussions, it appears that there are two ways to evaluate the adequacy of explanations for our current purposes. First, as argued in the first section, the mere acquisition of truth does not fully satisfy our epistemic desires. We not

only aim to uncover the truth, but also seek to obtain it on an appropriate basis that we can trust. The same principle applies when we account for normative linguistic practices. As Dreier puts it: “Can we understand the idea that someone uttering the conditional is committed to the consequent on condition that she accepts the antecedent? We need some assurance.”<sup>1</sup> Merely avoiding possible contradictions in known reality and opening up theoretical explanatory spaces does not automatically lead us to accept the comforting effect of an explanation, which is typically associated with compelling realist theories. Without an objective guarantee, an explanation for the operation of the internal perspective struggles to meet the realist standard — that is, being able to answer to the “in virtue of what” question. However, a metaethicist like Timmons may readily admit: “It is indeed part of my metaethical position that there is no metaphysical backing to moral discourse [...]”<sup>2</sup> In a second way of evaluation, the bar set by realism is considered unnecessarily high. And realists may be challenged for the difficulty in defending their view, as it is tough for them to convince people of the existence of referential facts. Following the latter way of assessment, we may, in effect, refuse to directly answer the realist question, for it already presupposes something deemed uncalled for. Yet, given the question’s initial appeal, it seems that we need to offer some form of response to it. What, then, should we provide instead of attempting to meet the realists’ demand? Drawing on the insights we just learned from the case of early childhood education, this dissertation suggests that the response could be a proposal of ceasing the quest for such certainty.

### 2.2.2 The Pragmatic Turn

Assuming that truth is (or is one of) the predetermined goal(s) that exist beyond our epistemic agents for inquiry aligns with a mode of thinking that we are not only familiar with due to our prior introduction to metaepistemological realism, but also because it

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<sup>1</sup> James Dreier, "Expressivist Embeddings and Minimalist Truth," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 83, no. 1 (1996): p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Timmons, *Morality without Foundations*, p. 171.

echoes what could be referred to as the contemplative tradition.<sup>1</sup> In this tradition, theories take precedence over practices.<sup>2</sup> However, many philosophers have realized its inherent problems; they seek to address them by subverting the tradition. This leads to a movement in philosophy known as the pragmatic turn. Among different approaches contributing to this turn, John Dewey's project stands out as exemplifying it within the domain of epistemology, thus making it especially worth our attention.<sup>3</sup>

According to Dewey, the human nature of seeking safety has led to a philosophical tradition that centers on theory: As human beings, we can choose to either alter our emotions and ideas in our thoughts, or change the natural world through action to attain a sense of security. However, tracing back to the time where philosophy originated, the external world was extremely uncontrollable for ancient people. Since there was no much certainty to be gained from performing actions upon their environment, people developed religions and philosophy to find some peace and certainty in their thoughts.<sup>4</sup> This led classical philosophy to prioritize certain and invariant theories as the highest goal, leading to two theoretical consequences. First, the world is perceived as comprising two parts: the superior realm that is extraordinary and holy; and the inferior realm that is ordinary and lucky.<sup>5</sup> This distinction resulted in the differentiation between two sorts of activities: theoretical activities that seek for eternally unchanging reality, and practical activities that deal with variable phenomena. Readers who are more familiar with the history of philosophy will soon realize that it is the former type of activities that most philosophers consider superior and have pursued throughout the history. As philosophers continually

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<sup>1</sup> Zhen-hua Yu, "The Tradition of Theoria/Contemplation vs. the Pragmatic Turn—An Investigation with a Focus on Dewey's Quest for Certainty," *Philosophical Researches* 07 (2017): p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (MIT Press, 1992), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Yu, "The Tradition of Theoria/Contemplation vs. the Pragmatic Turn—An Investigation with a Focus on Dewey's Quest for Certainty," p. 108. The pragmatic turn concerns a wide range of philosophical topics and issues, and this dissertation is only mentioning one of them due to space constraints. For further discussions, see, for example, Richard J Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Polity, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Dewey, *Quest for Certainty*, 4, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. It is important to note here that "meanings are not to be assigned on the basis of present usage. Everything which was charged with some extraordinary potency for benefit or injury was holy; holiness meant necessity for being approached with ceremonial scruples." In contrast, "[a] lucky object is something to be used. It is to be manipulated rather than approached with awe." (*ibid.*)



refine their theories, a picture that portrays the world as encompassing two worlds gradually becomes clearer and increasingly attractive. Second, based on the first point, philosophers have formed a metaphysical framework. Under this framework, philosophers distinguish knowledge from action in epistemology, and thus develop a spectator theory of knowledge. This theory assumes that epistemic agents have no influence on preexisting, invariant epistemic objects, and can only gain knowledge through detached observation, a process that is modeled on visual activity.<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to see the parallels between, on the one hand, the notion of invariable epistemic objects, the exclusion of epistemic agents' impact on these objects, and the modeling of epistemological concepts on a basic structure that imitates visual activities, and, on the other hand, the characteristics of epistemology conceived from a realist standpoint, especially the presumption of accessible epistemic facts. Viewed in this light, veritism can be understood as specifying a predetermined epistemic goal as truth, and metaepistemological realism can be interpreted as an application of the spectator theory of knowledge to epistemology itself. However, if Dewey is right, the scientific revolution has dismantled the contemplative tradition and the spectator theory of knowledge, and it necessitates a shift from traditional epistemology that separates knowledge from action to a new form of epistemology — an epistemology of experimental inquiry. It follows that this shift prompts a reevaluation of the received positions of realism and veritism.

Three aspects of this new form of epistemology should be emphasized: "First, resorting to external actions and altering the objects under observation, or the relationships between us and these objects to understand them, is the primary characteristic of the epistemology of experimental inquiry." "Second, the practice/action in experimental inquiry is not arbitrary or chaotic. Rather, it unfolds in an organized manner under the guidance of concepts, with the goal of seeking solutions to problems." "Third, according to the epistemology of experimental inquiry, the object of knowledge is not a preexisting reality, but the consequence of experimental inquiry."<sup>2</sup> By reversing the order between

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 19. Cf. Yu, "The Tradition of Theoria/Contemplation vs. the Pragmatic Turn—An Investigation with a Focus on Dewey's Quest for Certainty," pp. 109-10.

<sup>2</sup> "The Tradition of Theoria/Contemplation vs. the Pragmatic Turn—An Investigation with a Focus on Dewey's Quest for Certainty," pp. 111-12. My translation.

theory and practice, the shift from the spectator theory of knowledge to the epistemology of experimental inquiry effectively challenges the contemplative tradition. It is both interesting and significant to note that many claims of epistemic expressivism resonate with these ideas. For example, epistemic expressivists highlight that epistemological research should acknowledge the constructive role that epistemic agents play in making epistemic assertions. Epistemic expressivists also maintain that while epistemic assertions reflect the epistemic norms accepted by epistemic agents, these assertions also express the epistemic agents' conative mental states, including but not limited to their desires to solve problems and end inquiry. Moreover, epistemic expressivism firmly rejects the presupposition of epistemic facts, such as factually correct epistemic modes that exist prior to experimental inquiry, and so forth. The point here is not that Dewey's thought confirms the correctness of epistemic expressivism, but that epistemic expressivism offers a route to follow Dewey's call — what realists and veritists are defending is a form of pursuit that could be reimagined. If there is no need for us to presuppose the existence of the truth about what is to be pursued in the epistemology of experimental inquiry, then the threat posed by Lynch seems considerably diminished, since we no longer have to assume in advance that pursuing truth is the only goal, or one of the acceptable final goals of inquiry. More importantly, if the quest for objective "assurance" turns out to be a quest for certainty to avoid the unfavorable fact "that uncertainty involves us in peril of evils,"<sup>1</sup> then it appears to be a preference that is much less justified in its demands for satisfaction. That is to say, we can address this in many other ways that do not necessitate validating this quest in the first place, but instead, suggest its cessation. Considering our previous discussions, this approach appears to be more advantageous as it is less theoretically burdensome. Neither the realist project nor Timmons' irrealist project seems to achieve their intended level of satisfaction, yet the resistance of this natural inclination seems relatively more conceivable. This effectively allows us to understand how epistemic expressivism could respond to the realist demand and subsequently the problem brought by our implicit line of thought by making a similar proposal. In addition, drawing on its resonance with the epistemology of experimental inquiry, it may also lead to an approach that potentially serves as a replacement.

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey, *Quest for Certainty*, 4, p. 12.

This alternative or replacement perspective enables us to consider epistemology, truth, wisdom, and their relationships in a less burdened way. Nevertheless, this does not equate to abandoning the significance attached to the concept of truth. As Dewey warns, challenging the contemplative tradition is not about simply reversing the roles of theory and practice. What is emphasized in our development of the epistemic expressivist line of thought is that epistemological studies do not necessarily lead to unchangeable representations of the real world. Instead, they may yield constructions that are open to refutation or further revision. Our objective was never to criticize the thought that truth serves as the fundamental good, but rather to reflect on it from a new perspective that prompts further thinking about the direction of general epistemological research — that is, a shift from the world-to-mind direction to the mind-to-world direction.<sup>1</sup> According to Carter and Chrisman, the core expressivist maneuver made by epistemic expressivism should be understood

not as an attempt to take up an ‘external’ perspective constituted by the denial of all value, reasons, and evidence, but as a change from a change from

(i) a question about the nature of some feature of the world whose existence is disputed: epistemic facts or values

to

(ii) a question about the nature of a *different* feature of the world whose existence is not in dispute: epistemic *evaluations*.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the essence of the core expressivist maneuver is to provide a theory about assigning value, but without necessitating any ontological commitment backing such value. Granted, it is understandable that when making epistemic judgments, epistemic agents might not completely avoid making tacit ontological commitments. However, Carter and Chrisman argue that it is indeed possible in everyday life for us to lean forward to certain choices based on certain values, while remaining unclear on what these values exactly entail and whether they in fact exist or not. When viewed under the expressivist

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<sup>1</sup> Ji-peng He, "Metaepistemology and Epistemic Expressivism," *Studies in Dialectics of Nature* 10 (2021): p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> J. Adam Carter and Matthew Chrisman, "Is Epistemic Expressivism Incompatible with Inquiry?," *Philosophical Studies* 159, no. 3 (2012): p. 337, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-011-9710-9>.

framework, it is precisely this kind of implicit commitment that people are making when they engage with epistemic discourse.<sup>1</sup> Since operative epistemic norms are not necessarily external entities awaiting our description, and our judgments and evaluations contribute to the construction of them, the core maneuver introduces both a separation between our epistemic evaluations and our tentative descriptions of the world, and a shift of focus from the nature or essence of some sort of values to our actual evaluative processes. Thus, from the epistemic expressivist perspective, the focus of normative studies should shift from the object that is being evaluated to the process of evaluation itself, which involves various sources of evaluation and their complex interrelationships. Epistemic expressivists, therefore, are primarily concerned with the implications of our performing evaluative actions.<sup>2</sup>

An additional point to note is that although there seems to be a tendency for epistemic expressivism to remain silent when it comes to metaphysical problems in epistemology, there is no necessary contradiction between expressivism (at least in our current interpretation) and metaphysics. For instance, one possible way out could be based on recognizing that “[g]rammatical expressions are something publicly accessible; one can read structures off from them without having to refer to what is merely subjective.”<sup>3</sup> While epistemic disagreements certainly exist between different epistemic subjects, these disagreements are not necessarily incommunicable and irreconcilable. Driven by our shared epistemic desires, epistemic agents do have certain motivation to construct a more promising epistemic norm together, which also provides opportunities for creating an epistemological metaphysics in this constructive sense. But a detailed discussion of this respect goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

In summary, this section has mainly concentrated on addressing the underlying problem presented by this dissertation’s implicit line of thought: whether epistemic expressivism, and the conclusions drawn within this framework or those that align with it, can satisfactorily account for our epistemic linguistic practice to the extent that epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> He, "Metaepistemology and Epistemic Expressivism," pp. 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 45.

realism is expected to do so. It was initially argued that epistemic expressivism does not only excel at specific epistemological issues, such as handling the empirical challenge against epistemologists' expert intuitions and the problem of motivation, but can also provide insights on a more comprehensive level by offering a more plausible solution to skepticism. We then discussed another, less promising, aspect of epistemic expressivism that it may not provide the same objective assurance as epistemic realism. To address this potential limitation, it was argued that while a quest for certainty is a natural and understandable inclination, it does not have to be met with satisfaction. Instead, it can be confronted through other responses, such as cessation. Furthermore, epistemic expressivism may even lead us to reframe this quest in a broader picture. By shifting from the spectator theory of epistemological knowledge to the epistemology of experimental inquiry about epistemology itself, epistemic expressivism can respond to the lingering issue tied to our implicit thread on the metaepistemological level, which paves the way for a new understanding of our epistemology in light of the pragmatic turn.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has laid the groundwork for the forthcoming exploration of a plausible alternative approach to theorizing wisdom. On the one hand, it has brought different lines of reasoning of this dissertation together, thereby offering a twofold process understanding of the concept of wisdom — wisdom being seen within the framework of a process interpretation of our epistemic discourse and theorized as the end of our epistemic process. This perspective enables us to develop a process theory of wisdom. On the other hand, this chapter has provided a preliminary assessment of the merits and shortcomings of this newly introduced approach, resulting in a warrant for further examination of its feasibility in the subsequent chapter. The remaining task, then, lies in determining whether this approach developed upon epistemic expressivism outperforms competing theories on other issues concerning the theorization of wisdom, particularly those mentioned in Chapter 1.

## Chapter 5: A Process Theory of Wisdom and Potential Objections

**Chapter Abstract:** This chapter develops a theory of wisdom anchored in the proposed concept of wisdom, as shaped by the process understanding of epistemic linguistic practice. Drawing from the virtue-based interpretation of the fundamental epistemic good, the theory posits wisdom as the ultimate aim of the idealized epistemic process viewed from first-personal perspectives. This conceptual framework allows the theory to address various issues raised in the first chapter, notably the challenge of reconciling potentially conflicting plausible requirements for wisdom. Meanwhile, by highlighting its underlying metaepistemological foundation, this theory distinguishes itself from others by clarifying the source of the concept's normative force. However, this concept of wisdom also positions the theory as interim, needing further refinement in specific contexts in extended research.

In light of conclusions drawn in the previous chapters, this chapter will introduce a process theory of wisdom that conceptualizes wisdom as the end of idealized epistemic process. This theory is deeply anchored in the process understanding of our epistemic linguistic discourse. The first section will formulate the theory and assess its capacity to meet the theoretical expectations and address issues identified in the first chapter. The second section will further examine its ability to respond to potential objections, particularly those that challenge its underlying line of thought. If the proposed theory is tenable, it will offer not only a more plausible theory of wisdom, but also a more comprehensive understanding of the concept itself.

### 1. A Process Theory of Wisdom

We can now begin developing a more plausible theory of wisdom, or more ambitiously, a more plausible way of theorizing wisdom, specifically its epistemic aspect. Thus far, this dissertation has mainly considered two criteria for evaluating a theory's plausibility. First, we anticipate that our theory of wisdom will conform to the basic framework outlined in Chapter 1, while addressing the issues highlighted in the same

chapter. Second, we expect that our proposal will be informed by our earlier discussions that follow Chapter 1. In this section, we start Subsection 1.1 by addressing the second criterion through the recapitulation of the lessons learned that are directly associated with the theorization of wisdom. A theory of wisdom will be proposed based on this foundation in Sub-subsection 1.1.1. After further elaborating the theory with additional clarification and specification in Sub-subsection 1.1.2, we will examine whether it meets the first criterion by applying the proposed theory to the considerations raised in Chapter 1 in Subsection 1.2. The examination will begin by considering how to connect our proposal with the plausible framework for theorizing wisdom in Sub-subsection 1.2.1. This discussion then leads to a more general treatment of different plausible requirements for wisdom, which will be discussed in Sub-subsection 1.2.2. Sub-subsection 1.2.3 will extend our exploration focusing on the epistemic aspect of wisdom to its practical aspect, which is the last consideration raised in Chapter 1. Finally, a summary of these discussions will be provided in Subsection 1.3.

## **1.1 Stating the Theory**

### **1.1.1 A New Approach to Theorization**

The first key consideration that needs to be taken into account is the relationship between theory and practice, especially our theoretical efforts to account for our epistemic linguistic practice. This topic was chiefly discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, and the following points involved are likely to have a significant impact on our theorization:

- (1) Although theoretical arguments may not justify the common non-relative treatment of epistemic notions, practical considerations provide a justifying reason to continue this approach.

Point (1) is based on the practical usefulness of our epistemic discourse. Because the practical utility of our epistemic discourse arises from its typically non-relative form, it follows that our theory of wisdom should also adopt a non-relative stance. Nevertheless, treating epistemic concepts in this way is just one characteristic among many when we consider the ordinary epistemic discourse. Such discourse manifests in various forms,

ranging from casual conversations about one’s epistemic status to more serious scholarly debates concerning the nature and appropriate attribution of epistemic properties. We may label these direct, prominent practices as “first-order.” And these first-order epistemic linguistic practices are generally conducted under certain implicit principles or against an implicit background — some common expectations and assumptions that, when we engage in first-order epistemic linguistic practices, are shared between us and our interlocutors. Such norms are part of what we may call “second-order” epistemological commitments, which guide us to make definitive assertions in epistemic discussions and to expect clear, yes-or-no answers to our epistemological questions, like issues about the acquisition, justification, and nature of knowledge. These commitments, in effect, facilitate our communication, and the practical utility of our discourse strongly suggests that our theories, including theories of wisdom, should align with these commitments, thereby rendering epistemic relativism unfavorable. Assessing relativism from this perspective introduces a new angle to understand our epistemic discourse in Chapter 3 (specifically, §2.1.2), as it frames our epistemic discourse as a process of seeking answers to epistemological issues:

- (2) Participation in epistemic discourse is a dynamic process aimed at satisfying our epistemic desires for answers to epistemological questions.

Point (2), at the same time, introduces a new perspective for understanding wisdom. That is, wisdom can be theorized considering its role within an epistemic process, and in light of its connection with other significant epistemic notions in the “conceptual web” that our epistemic discourse weaves and reflects. Contrast this with the theories explored in Chapter 1, which focused on wisdom’s intrinsic properties and attempted to define its detailed necessary and sufficient conditions; a theory of wisdom developed from the process standpoint places more emphasis on wisdom’s function and how it interacts with other elements in the epistemic discourse, such as knowledge and understanding. This interpretation itself is not limited to wisdom and can be applied to other notions involved in the process. However, when we delved into the epistemic desires that motivate us to engage in the epistemic process in Chapter 4 (specifically, §1.3.2), it was revealed that wisdom fits into this process somehow differently: Wisdom can serve as the ultimate epistemic goal of the idealized version of our epistemic process, namely, the goal of



virtuous inquiry, thereby holding a unique position as the fundamental good in epistemology:

- (3) Wisdom, as a subset of epistemically grounded truth, can be considered as what virtuous inquirers ultimately pursue and thus the fundamental epistemic good.

Since (2) suggests that we can view our epistemic discourse as an epistemic process about epistemological issues, there seems to be an overlap between (2) and (3) concerning wisdom's unique role within this process. If wisdom serves as the ultimate goal of idealized inquiry, then it should also be the driving force behind our epistemic discourse. This connection appears to imply that wisdom and our epistemological enterprise can mutually define on the basis of wisdom's epistemological fundamentality, and we can further develop a theory of wisdom that aligns with this line of thinking. That said, there is some ambiguity regarding the meaning of "process" in this context. By "epistemic process," we may refer to very different things. For example, we can distinguish between individual epistemic process and group epistemic process. Wisdom can be plausibly considered as a personal epistemic achievement — wisdom is what an epistemic subject ultimately aims at or is supposed to aim at. This is what (3) is about: When we think about virtuous inquiry, although it could be inquiry conducted by multiple virtuous inquirers, it is still conceived primarily as what individual epistemic agents can attain. Nonetheless, when we talk about our epistemic linguistic practice as an epistemic process, we seem to point to a joint human effort in relation to the discovery of answers to epistemological questions that we are more or less interested in. When discussing how wisdom can serve as the ultimate pursuit in virtuous inquiry — and thus stand as the fundamental good in epistemology, which is at the same time the fundamental epistemic concept as well as the cornerstone where final epistemic value resides — we also seem to consider the epistemic discourse as a collective enterprise. A series of potential issues about (2) then arises regarding the relationship between this collective epistemic process and wisdom — When we claim that wisdom is the ultimate end of epistemic processes, do we include the collective pursuit of epistemological answers also a part of them? If so, how should we understand the role that wisdom plays in this process? Does it serve a different purpose than in personal epistemic process? If not, what does it mean by saying that wisdom is the ultimate pursuit of our inquiry of epistemological issues? Is whether or not wisdom is the ultimate epistemic

pursuit not itself one of the epistemological questions that we attempt to solve in the collective inquiry?

We can clarify the relationship between wisdom and epistemic discourse, conceived as an epistemic process, by following the line of reasoning of virtuous inquirers that leads to (3). This reasoning is deeply rooted in individual experience, which is primarily conducted from a first-personal perspective.<sup>1</sup> It then naturally intersects with (2) as epistemic agents participate in our epistemic discourse, where epistemological issues are publicly discussed, to better understand what deserves pursuing in cognitive activities.

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion might suggest a form of individualism, but it is crucial to differentiate this from egoism or any overly self-centered stance. This distinction is important because, typically, the inquiry of an epistemic agent inherently involves engagement with their epistemic community and is normally facilitated by social and environmental factors. It would be counterintuitive, for instance, to imagine a “wolf boy” isolated from society achieving genuine, much less virtuous, epistemic success or attaining a high epistemic status like wisdom.

If the characterization here does imply a kind of individualism, it is more accurate to call it “methodological individualism,” in the sense that the phenomena of epistemic activities are best understood and explained through individual characteristics and actions, specifically from a first-personal perspective. This idea is intuitive as long as we consider cognition to be agential or partially agential, even for aspects more related to non-individual elements. For example, when we acknowledge the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding intellectual virtues, the latter seem to have an outward focus (e.g., honesty, which is valuable particularly for its contribution to the community’s epistemic flourishing by strengthening the testimonial chain). However, they are both acquired, exercised, and refined through individual effort, and they are normally praiseworthy as such. Individual epistemic agency has a foundational role to play in the cultivation of these intellectual virtues, including the more socially situated ones, and subsequently in their communal contribution. Given that the concept of agency is intrinsically linked to a first-personal perspective, it stands to reason that our analysis of agential activities, including epistemic activities, benefits from adopting a framework like methodological individualism. Nevertheless, this approach does not exclude further non-first-personal perspective analyses. (For the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding intellectual virtues, see Jason Kawall, “Other-Regarding Epistemic Virtues,” *Ratio* 15, no. 3 (2002).)

There are, however, two potentially alternative views. First, one might disagree with this widely held belief that cognition is at least partially agential, or one might consider this point insignificant. For example, if the ultimate aim of any epistemic process is solely the collective epistemic growth in a mundane sense, individual epistemic achievements may be viewed as valuable only insofar as they contribute to the community’s repository of information. In such a radical or even outlandish view, the significance of the first-personal perspective is greatly diminished. Nonetheless, this view still seems to be compatible with a methodologically individualistic framework, albeit with considerably reduced emphasis or interest. Second, one might point out that there are certain epistemic phenomena in which what is primarily involved is joint, rather than individual, epistemic agency. For instance, in the case of testimonial knowledge — understood as quality information already possessed and then distributed by the epistemic community — what is prominent is the transmission of knowledge that involves joint agency constituted by the cooperation between speakers and hearers; and such shared agency cannot be further reduced. (John Greco, *The Transmission of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).) That being said, considering that testimonial knowledge (assuming that we recognize the legitimacy of this form of knowledge) is just one among several ways of acquiring knowledge and is dependent on antecedently generated knowledge for transmission, it remains reasonable to approach epistemic activities generally and primarily from an individual perspective.

Additionally, our engagement in public epistemic discourse normally serves not only to achieve our own epistemic goals, but also to contribute our findings and conclusions, thereby assisting others in their individual epistemic journeys.

A subtle complexity, however, arises here: It does seem to make sense to say that our collaborative efforts culminate in wisdom. This notion transcends a mere aggregation of individual attainment and represents a collective achievement not reducible to the sum of individual successes. But it is problematic to categorize this as a straightforward group or communal accomplishment modeled on individual achievements. The reason is that although an individual epistemic agent can be considered wise, attributing the same epistemic state of wisdom to a collective entity like a group or community seems misplaced.<sup>1</sup> While we have encountered the concept of collective wisdom in Chapter 1, the focus there appears to be on wisdom as an output, rather than an inherent quality of the collective entity producing it.

The point here is that the term “wisdom” is used somewhat differently depending on whether we are discussing personal or collective epistemic processes. Crudely put, in a collective context, “wisdom” functions solely as a product of the epistemic process, whereas in the individual cases it serves as both a product and a quality of the person producing it. However, these differing usages are not entirely separated from the notion of wisdom as the ultimate aim of a personal epistemic journey. On the one hand, if we consider individual participation in public epistemic discourse (which obviously constitutes the discourse itself) as part of one’s personal epistemic journey, then any wisdom thus gained can be assessed within the broader context of an individual’s ultimate epistemic pursuit. On the other hand, just like many other crucial epistemic notions, wisdom is better framed in terms of epistemic agents. We often define wisdom, belief,

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that the assessment of one’s wisdom has nothing to do with any social factors. From the perspective of individuals, if one considers social life or social engagement significant, then one’s pursuit of wisdom may also expect wisdom to be socially situated. On the other hand, from the social perspective, one may agree that “[c]ooperative success depends on the group’s ability to monitor people’s aptitudes and ineptitudes.” (Ernest Sosa, *Reflective Knowledge: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume II*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 188.) “When the agent’s actions are said to be *right* and the cognizer’s beliefs *knowledge*, we speak implicitly of the virtues, practical or intellectual, seated in that subject, which (a) give rise to that action or belief, adding to the subject’s worth as agent or cognizer, and which (b) make him reliable and trustworthy over an interesting spread of possible choices or beliefs, and circumstances.” (*ibid.*, p. 189.)

knowledge, understanding, and so on in the form of “An epistemic subject S is wise/believes/knows/understands that...” for a good reason, which is their inherent need for individual epistemic agency to be understood properly. Nevertheless, when we talk about “collective wisdom,” this intrinsic relation between the epistemic agents and wisdom is much less prominent. In such cases, it will be beneficial to understand why a particular outcome counts as “wisdom” by considering certain individual agents to whom wisdom can be attributed. For example, a collective decision’s wisdom might be evaluated based on how it would be regarded if made by an individual epistemic agent, or how helpful it is for the collective entity when being considered as a unified entity. In any case, incorporating the concept of collective wisdom into the broader landscape of individual epistemic processes — especially when those processes involve participation in collective inquiry — can help us better evaluate and understand it.

The foregoing discussion facilitates an integrated reading of (2) and (3), in which it appears that (3) provides a framework for us to better interpret (2). However, as some readers may remember, this is not the relation between (2) and (3) when they were initially introduced. In fact, in earlier chapters, (2) served as a basis for theorizing wisdom, because our epistemic discourse is expected to produce useful epistemological insights into the concept of wisdom, specifically its epistemic aspect. It was on (2) that (3) was developed, drawing upon the valuable veritist tradition and its argument from virtuous inquiry. At this point, it may seem somewhat puzzling that (3), which apparently derives its foundation from (2), circles back to inform (2). This could raise concerns about potential circular reasoning or a conceptual mismatch, given that these two aspects operate on different levels. However, from the outset, we justified (2) with a practical reason (as indicated in (1)). It allows us to focus on the outcomes rather than a theoretical foundation, thereby avoiding a circular justification.<sup>1</sup> As for the potential mismatch, indeed, (2) pertains to the reality of our epistemic linguistic practice; and by embracing its practical justification, we are enabled to take its outcomes into consideration, which includes the basis of (3). Yet, (3)

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<sup>1</sup> It might be interesting to note that one may also argue that such circularity does not have to be the kind of vicious circularity that we normally find unfavorable. However, I will not delve deeper into this possible way out due to both space constraints and the fact that our line of thought does not rely upon a theoretical justification.

does not function as a prerequisite for (2); instead, it emerges as a reconsideration of the practice addressed by (2). Such a reflective examination is akin to other theoretical discussions of practice and serves to meet intellectual needs, provide explanatory frameworks, and guide future practice. This leads to a refined understanding of the theoretical and practical dimensions, accommodating both (2) and (3).

The synthesis of (2) and (3) then leads us to conceptualize wisdom as the ultimate epistemic aim for virtuous inquirers and thus as the ultimate goal of one's epistemic process. However, before we proceed, it should be pointed out that there are two potential concerns here. First, if virtuous inquirers inherently seek wisdom as a select subset of epistemically grounded truth, integrating this into an account based on both (2) and (3) might result in redundancy. We will return to this issue later. Second, while wisdom, from the standpoint of virtuous inquiry, can be understood as the ultimate epistemic goal, this perspective might be too vague for a satisfying definition. This is, of course, not to suggest that the concept of virtue lacks depth or richness. Quite the contrary, it carries a significant historical baggage, sometimes so heavy that it becomes overwhelming to make full use of. Indeed, in our exploration, the terms "virtuous inquirers" and "virtuous inquiry" have been used in a rather generalized manner, without deeper considerations of how to interpret the concept of virtue. Specifically, in our development of the argument from virtuous inquiry, the concept of "virtuous" was employed in its broad sense, which is close or equal to functioning well or excellently;<sup>1</sup> and virtuous inquirers were considered primarily as epistemic agents performing in a good way. In this general sense, to be intellectually virtuous essentially means that these epistemic agents are behaving well. These good inquirers are admirable for their epistemic qualities, which contribute to the achievement of epistemically desirable outcomes. Given this understanding, some alternative terms can be adopted to enrich the vocabulary of this dissertation. In fact, we have already substituted "virtuous" with "ideal" in some places. But what is more important is that there is an even more compelling reason to make such a substitution.

Virtue epistemology, despite being a rich source of ideas for understanding our epistemic activities, can sometimes be too intricate and sophisticated to serve as a clear

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, "Republic," Book I, 334b.

foundation for our ensuing discussion without further clarification. In addition to the complex and occasionally inconsistent historical baggage that accompanies this concept, the field of virtue epistemology also has ongoing debates about key issues that call for further exploration. These include determining which characteristics merit the label of “intellectual virtues,” the role that such virtues play in cognition, their relation to other significant epistemological notions and philosophical concerns, etc.<sup>1</sup> Among these issues, the consideration of how to appropriately characterize virtue-based inquiry is particularly relevant to our current discussion. What qualifies as a virtuous epistemic process? Broadly speaking, it seems to be an epistemic process that manifests intellectual virtues. Nevertheless, the extent to which, or the manner in which, these virtues should manifest remains unclear. Should the process be conducted by an epistemically virtuous agent fully conscious of its details? That seems overly demanding. Could it be that the process primarily involves virtuous epistemic actions and behaviors? This interpretation appears more tenable and effectively captures how the process in question should mainly derive from and thus be attributable to a virtuous inquirer. However, this brings us to Jennifer Lackey’s critique of virtue epistemology (alongside other approaches that stress the role of credit in theories of knowledge), from which she derives the central theses of what she calls the *Deserving Credit View of Knowledge* (DCVK):

CREDIT: If *S* knows that *p*, then *S* deserves *credit* for truly believing that *p*.

DIFFERENCE: The central epistemic *difference* between *S* knowing that *p* and *S* truly believing that *q* merely by luck is the credit that *S* deserves for truly believing that *p*, but lacks for truly believing that *q*.

VALUE: The additional *value* that *S*’s knowing that *p* has over *S*’s truly believing that *q* merely by luck is the credit that *S* deserve.<sup>2</sup>

The central thesis here revolves around the notion of credit. Lackey specifies the virtue epistemologists’ criterion for being creditable as: “in order for *S* to deserve intellectual credit for truly believing that *p*, *S*’s reliable cognitive faculties must be the most

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Turri, Mark Alfano, and John Greco, “Virtue Epistemology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2021 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/epistemology-virtue/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Lackey, “Why We Don’t Deserve Credit for Everything We Know,” *Synthese* 158 (2007): p. 346.

salient part of the cause explaining why *S* holds the true belief in question.”<sup>1</sup> In her view, this criterion, coupled with CREDIT, leads to the implausible exclusion of non-creditable knowledge that we intuitively recognize. For instance, when we acquire testimonial knowledge by asking for directions, such knowledge fails to meet the “creditable” standard set by virtue epistemologists. This is because the most salient part of the cause explaining the belief in question lies not in us, but in the person who provides the directions.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, DCVK stands as flawed, casting doubt on virtue epistemologists’ relevant criteria for knowledge.

Lackey’s objection primarily targets the way virtue epistemology differentiates between mere true beliefs and knowledge. According to this view, the success of an epistemic process should be chiefly due to internal factors within the epistemic subjects. Such factors are often conceptualized as varying forms of epistemic effort, which are thought to result in corresponding epistemic outcomes. These efforts are typically linked to the illustration of virtuous inquiry. However, the counterexample of testimonial knowledge shows that virtue epistemology’s approach fails to accommodate certain forms of knowledge we find intuitively compelling. It is foreseeable that many virtue epistemologists would attempt to address this concern by clarifying or modifying their conception of what counts as a virtuous epistemic process to make it more inclusive.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, delving into those details is beyond the scope of this dissertation. What merits attention at this stage is that the crux of the tension lies in how we characterize a “virtuous epistemic process”: The debate is not whether a given epistemic process can be reasonably labeled as virtuous, but whether a given portrayal of “virtuous epistemic process” can accommodate some particular phenomena. Lackey’s objection, along with similar criticisms, suggests that there are certain epistemic statuses we consider desirable enough to qualify as knowledge, and what is problematic is that the virtue-based account cannot capture this intuition. Seeing the problem from this angle allows us to consider some other

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 352.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Sosa, *Virtue Epistemology*, 1, p. 95.

contentious issues in virtue epistemology under the same light, such as the situationist challenge which “can be framed as an inconsistent triad”:

*(non-skepticism)* Most people know quite a bit.

*(classical responsibilism)* Knowledge is true belief acquired and retained through responsibilist intellectual virtue.

*(epistemic situationism)* Most people’s conative intellectual traits are not virtues because they are highly sensitive to seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant situational influences.<sup>1</sup>

Setting aside the specific definitions and further distinctions within virtue epistemology — which are not our primary concern — the central issue remains: this variant of virtue theory of knowledge seems to preclude certain types of epistemic outcomes conventionally considered as knowledge, thereby rendering the theory flawed. What is puzzling is that critiques mentioned above, Lackey’s in particular, seem to cast doubt not merely on specific formulations of virtue epistemology, but on the broader framework itself, suggesting that it is fundamentally defective and incompatible with certain types of knowledge. However, if we step back from the particular formulations of any given theory, it becomes strange to think that an approach rooted in intellectual virtues would be essentially incapable of taking what we consider desirable epistemic statuses into account. After all, in the most general sense, intellectual virtues refer to characteristics that guide us towards epistemically desirable outcomes. Since knowledge is among these desirable outcomes, why would an epistemic process deemed virtuous be unfit by nature to attain some types of it?

From this perspective, it seems that the real sources of concern are these specific formulations of virtue epistemological theories, rather than the general framework of virtue epistemology itself. While debates over them are still important, focusing on them at this point would risk obscuring our main discussion at hand. On the one hand, it is unclear how these debates could ever reach a sufficiently conclusive resolution. Evolved formulations may encounter new counterexamples, which would then invite further clarifications or

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Alfano, "Expanding the Situationist Challenge to Responsibilist Virtue Epistemology," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 62, no. 247 (2012): p. 234.



adjustments in response, and so the cycle continues.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the nuances of these debates are not quite relevant to our current focus. After all, our usage of the term “virtuous” is very basic, trying only to include some elementary characterizations of intellectual virtues and agency — these features should be fundamental enough to be shared across common desirable epistemic processes and are not the subject of the criticisms listed above. Therefore, it may be beneficial to substitute the contentious term “virtuous” with a more basic and less theoretically burdened term to better articulate the concept we intend to express.

The term “excellent” initially appears to be a fitting replacement for “virtue,” given that “virtue” in its original meaning is close to “excellence.”<sup>2</sup> However, this term is inadequate because one can be an excellent epistemic agent without achieving wisdom as the highest epistemic good. Besides, the term “ultimate” in (3) implies something beyond ordinary capabilities. Otherwise, there would be no need to emphasize a goal that is already achievable in everyday life. In this context, we seem to be discussing something achievable only in “perfect” situations. Yet, “perfect” is also not a suitable option. Virtues are generally thought to be attainable within the bounds of an ordinary life, whereas “perfect” implies an unrealistically ideal state. Although “perfect” could serve as a motivation or a consistent driving force, it misses the nuance that we are aiming for. The most appropriate term seems to be “ideal,” which we have already employed, albeit unintentionally. “Ideal” captures a standard that exceeds mere excellence but remains realistically achievable. While this standard may be difficult to fully meet, it is not necessarily unapproachable, especially if pursued gradually.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. It has been noted that the situationist challenge can be formulated in multiple ways similar to the one discussed above. (Nathan L. King, “Responsibilist Virtue Epistemology: A Reply to the Situationist Challenge,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 255 (2014): p. 248.) However, these variations are also likely to be addressed through a more nuanced understanding of what virtue theorists require.

<sup>2</sup> Considering that *arête* is normally translated into virtue or excellence.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., e.g., “in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant holds out the idea of a *person of perfect virtue* as exemplifying the kind of person that we should aspire to be, even though life is at best an endless attempt to improve in virtue, and we have no measure of our progress.” (Adam Cureton and Thomas E. Hill, “Kant on Virtue: Seeking the Ideal in Human Conditions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Nancy E. Snow (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 270.)

Characterizing the epistemic process in (3) (and by extension also in (2), given its connection to (3)) as an “ideal epistemic process” is still consistent with the basic idea of virtue epistemology, if we understand it to include two core tendencies of thinking: first, that virtue epistemology is a normative discipline; and second, that epistemic value primarily derives from epistemic agents and their epistemic communities.<sup>1</sup> In our current context, they suggest that our epistemic process should be seen not just as a natural cognitive flow but also as something with a normative dimension, where we consider what form the process “ought” to take. Moreover, an epistemic process should be epistemically valuable primarily because of the epistemic agents and the community to which they belong. This latter point is already implicit in the process’ first-personal perspective as previously mentioned, and the former is reflected in the requirement for the epistemic process in question to be idealized. Therefore, for our current purposes, “ideal” appears to be a more fitting term than “virtuous,” as it captures the essence of what we mean without the contentious implications associated with the concept of “virtue.” We can then derive from the synthesis of (2) and (3) a preliminary formulation for a process theory of wisdom:

**A Process Theory of Wisdom (PT):** Wisdom is what an idealized epistemic process ultimately aims at.

We will see additional benefits for employing this general notion of idealization. However, two pressing issues also arise from this use and require more immediate attention. First, although the term “ideal” might not provoke much debate over how to interpret it in less stringent contexts, the understanding of what is “ideal” can vary. As we just observed, some may believe that something “ideal” must be in every sense perfect, while others might consider such a standard overly demanding and advocate for a more attainable definition within ordinary human capacities.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the conception of “ideal” does not always align with traditional understandings of “virtuous.” For example, an extreme consequentialist might insist that an ideal epistemic process does not inherently require the epistemic agent’s awareness of the process itself; as long as the epistemic outcomes are

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<sup>1</sup> Turri, Alfano, and Greco, "Virtue Epistemology."

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Howard J Curzer, "Against Idealization in Virtue Ethics," in *Varieties of Virtue Ethics*, ed. David Carr, James Arthur, and Kristján Kristjánsson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

sufficiently satisfactory, the epistemic process is ideal enough. A pragmatist or pragmaticist, on the other hand, might argue that “in the ideal state of complete information,” an “ultimate decision of the community” must be made, and thus for an epistemic process to be ideal, it should first be endorsed by the community.<sup>1</sup> The number of these potential “ideal” options appears to be infinite, with no clear restrictions to prevent them from conflicting with each other. Consider, for instance, the case of hermits’ esoteric wisdom versus the worldly wisdom we discussed in the first chapter. Although employing the term “virtuous” would not reconcile these disparate perspectives either, PT does allow for various interpretations of wisdom. This flexibility might give rise to worries about whether PT could permit implausible perspectives, thereby undermining its own plausibility; or whether these many perspectives make PT risk committing to a form of relativism, which in our line of thought is supposed to be rejected.

Furthermore, recall the unsolved concern mentioned earlier: At this stage, our understanding of wisdom is not only tied to an epistemic process, but is also informed and limited by the requirement for wisdom to be a subset of epistemically grounded truth. This constraint should exclude certain alternative conceptions of “ideal” that are not compatible with it. How, then, should we understand the relationship between this restriction and the more general, seemingly limitless concept of “ideal”? What is more complicated is that this constraint is not the only one that we have encountered. Remember that in the first chapter, we established a basic framework for theorizing wisdom. How does this framework relate to both the epistemically grounded truth conception of wisdom and the process-based reading of wisdom? These questions are interrelated. They concern, on the one hand, how to understand the requirement of idealization while maintaining its plausibility and, on the other hand, how to integrate it with other plausible interpretations of wisdom that we have discussed in this dissertation. With these considerations in mind, we will have a closer scrutinization of PT in the next sub-subsection.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), 5.316.

### 1.1.2 Idealizing Epistemic Process

The potential issues just mentioned can be broadly categorized into two groups: first, the potentially worrying consequences of the seemingly limitless array of possible conceptions of an “idealized epistemic process,” such as the inclusion of implausible proposals and the risk of inviting relativism; second, the relationship between plausible interpretations of the ideal epistemic process — specifically, those explored in this dissertation, including the basic framework for theorizing wisdom, the condition of wisdom as epistemically grounded truth, and the process understanding of wisdom. We will begin by addressing the first group of issues, and as the discussion progresses, the second will naturally come into play.

#### **(i) A pluralist treatment**

To address the first set of concerns, it is useful to recall that PT is grounded in a reason that is practically justifying, rather than theoretically so. This distinction means that PT does not claim to offer “truth” in the realist sense as a reflection of some ultimately objective epistemic facts. Rather, it seeks only to be plausible within the scope of current epistemic discourse. Even if PT in its current form, or in its upcoming, more developed form appears to be plausible, it is not immune to criticism. Over time, its form may evolve to maintain this plausibility, but such a transformation would not imply that earlier versions were incorrect or that the newer version is definitively correct. It might be the case, but the focus of our current discussion is not on establishing ultimate truth but on remaining plausible in light of our epistemic discourse. This foundational understanding of PT should inform its tolerance of various perspectives regarding what constitutes an ideal epistemic process. While there may indeed be numerous interpretations of what an ideal epistemic process is, their plausibility still needs to be assessed in light of current epistemic discourse and their mutual comparison. And this is effectively a very strong constraint on the seemingly unlimited number of possibilities for idealized epistemic processes; for even though many of them may initially be deemed ideal, the number that could survive closer scrutiny is much lower. In fact, we only recognize a limited range of wisdom, albeit there are diverse types of it. At the end of the day, only a select few candidates among the contenders for an ideal epistemic process are actually taken seriously and are expected to

be sufficiently plausible. Therefore, PT's openness to various proposals does not inherently invite implausible conceptions of wisdom.

The limitation regarding the plausibility of the potential candidates for an ideal epistemic process does not restrict the content of plausible options. In other words, although it may seem unrealistic, our approach is, in principle, open to an infinite number of plausible proposals, even those that are contradictory. And it is this pluralist orientation that might raise concerns about relativism. However, pluralism does not inherently lead to an "anything goes" relativist stance. Specifically, in our line of thought, what matters most is to keep the scope of pluralism within the bounds of plausibility. And since plausibility does not concern absolute truth, it does not pave the way for relativism, which deals with the nature of truth. As a result, we can respond to the first group of concerns by affirming that the questions it raises are not as pressing as they might initially appear. That said, it is conceivable that relatively plausible, yet incompatible proposals could coexist. We have already encountered this phenomenon in the illustrative case contrasting hermits' wisdom and worldly wisdom in Chapter 1, which prompted our extensive exploration into metaepistemology. Our pluralist approach, then, in fact accommodates these contradictory conceptions of wisdom and effectively suggests that such coexistence is understandable and acceptable within the framework of a process theory of wisdom. This subsequently leads us back to the resolution of the looming issue. We will elucidate why this is the case very shortly.

### **(ii) Plausibility from perspectives**

What is behind the second concern is that there are various methods for evaluating a theory's plausibility. When scrutinizing a particular version of a wisdom theory, special attention should be paid to its pros and cons in addressing relevant issues within the given context. In this dissertation, the first elements for consideration are the key findings from Chapter 1: There are, on the one hand, a basic framework that helps shape a plausible candidate for a wisdom theory; and, on the other hand, some specific challenges that existing competing theories of wisdom may not be able to handle satisfactorily. Subsequent to these are the developed understandings of wisdom articulated in later chapters. Specifically, the stipulation that wisdom is a select subset of truth grounded in an appropriate epistemic basis. And the dual interpretation of wisdom as the ultimate goal of

an ideal epistemic process — the process under discussion. These factors each impose certain limitations on further assessment of a theory's plausibility. However, do these factors all stem from the same source? Do they work together and create a coherent set of constraints? And how are they related to other potential conditions that might be deemed essential for a theory's plausibility?

It is obviously a mistake to assume that these factors restrict subsequent considerations simply based on the order in which they were explored. Instead, a relatively more plausible starting point is the underlying first-personal tone set by PT. That is, recall that since the accommodation of the dual senses of a process understanding of wisdom is carried out within a framework emphasizing a personal epistemic journey, PT essentially offers a view from a personal perspective. After all, what could better serve as both the origin from which epistemic discourse derives and the entry point for exploring what has been derived than the first-personal perspective itself? This idea should not be too surprising if we concentrate on the evaluation of one's wisdom, for many will find a true hermit a truly wise person, regardless of whether or not she is blameworthy for abandoning her worldly responsibilities, and this phenomenon clearly implies some conflicts between different perspectives — the foreseen consequence of the pluralist treatment that we just mentioned.

A possible worry here is that elements with an individual flavor are often intuitively unfavorable in epistemology, for human beings — especially paradigmatically virtuous agents — are typically socially situated. Nevertheless, this requirement of situatedness can be interpreted in two ways. First, we are indeed usually incapable of attaining an advanced epistemic state all by ourselves. This point — that social cooperation being crucial in one's knowledge accumulation — is also reflected in our natural inclination to engage in and rely on such engagement in epistemic discourse. However, this interpretation alone does not seem to be inherently incompatible with individualism, whether understood neutrally<sup>1</sup> or extremely. For example, an epistemic agent might be so self-centered that she not only prioritizes her own intellectual interest in an understandable manner, but also views her epistemic community solely as a tool to achieve more epistemic outcomes for herself,

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<sup>1</sup> As in the case of methodological individualism, which was discussed in the first footnote of this chapter.

regardless of the collective epistemic flourishing. People around her might only be considered as resources that she can utilize to achieve her own epistemic goal. In this case, although she might recognize her limitations and dependencies, most would not consider her as acting responsibly within her community. In essence, there is a prevailing expectation that one's involvement in socially epistemic endeavors should, at a minimum, be mutually beneficial. When it comes to epistemic states that enjoy higher status like wisdom, people may even expect those who possess such epistemic properties to contribute more to the society than the other way around, and even do so for the shared good itself. This constitutes the second and more demanding reading of how epistemic agents, especially those who are more epistemically advanced, should situate themselves socially. In other words, there seems to be an expectation that epistemic agents should adhere to some form of epistemic ethics. Then, a concern might be raised: PT's conceptualization of wisdom appears to neglect this widely held social expectation. Is this an oversight that poses a significant problem?

We may answer this question on two different levels. On the surface level, a straightforward response is that this concern is not a fatal one. Just like the case that if one already knows something, how her knowledge is formed does not affect the judgment of her possession of that very knowledge, for this is a separate issue from the formation of belief or how a mental state amounts to knowledge; the final product of wisdom, once attained and acknowledged, should not be subjected to further scrutiny solely in terms of its outcome. One might question the principles against which we judge that such an outcome is gained (e.g., the reasons for such judgment), but that would diverge into another topic. Given that our theory concentrates on the acquisition of wisdom as the ultimate end of one's epistemic journey, this issue does not pose a direct challenge. That said, on a deeper, more subtle level, questions may arise as to whether societal expectations are implicitly included in the idealization requirement of PT. This becomes particularly relevant when considering that human excellence has traditionally been linked to social engagement in the demanding sense (consider, for example, the requirement of building virtuous friendship with other people). Regarding this concern, our line of thought would suggest as before that our response should hinge on the current state of our epistemic discourse, without the support from and the need to be supported by corresponding

epistemic facts. This means that we are not going to provide an ultimately absolute answer about the inherent features of an idealized epistemic process. However, in this case, there seems to be no unified stance in our epistemic discourse on whether idealized epistemic agents ought to be fully integrated into their communities and meet societal expectations, given contradictory cases like the contrast between hermits' and social activists' wisdom.

At the same time, one may soon realize that even if there is a seemingly clear answer to be found as a plausible takeaway on this issue, this conclusion is essentially just another insight gained from our epistemic discourse, much like other plausible findings that we have encountered thus far. Then, what makes deriving an answer on this issue more challenging than on previous ones? The obvious difference between them seems to lie in the presence of counterexamples — the strong requirement for social situatedness is directly challenged by the acknowledged wisdom of hermits, yet this challenge is also insufficient to exclusively support the opposite case. At this point, a methodology like “reflective equilibrium”<sup>1</sup> appears needed to mutually adjust the particular epistemic judgments and the epistemic principles in question for greater consistency. This should also help clarify the interrelations between various plausible requirements that we have identified (and potentially will discover) in our epistemic discourse. However, there seems to be a contextual difference in how reflective equilibrium operates between the case where this methodology is usually applied (justice, deductive and inductive inference) and the case where it can be employed within the scope of PT. In the former case, reflective

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<sup>1</sup> In a sense that basically aligns with John Rawls' characterization, without committing to his optimistic prospect: “Here we may be looking for a way to remove our doubts. We can check an interpretation of the initial situation, then, by the capacity of its principles to accommodate our firmest convictions and to provide guidance where guidance is needed.

In searching for the most favored description of this situation we work from both ends. We begin by describing it so that it represents generally shared and preferably weak conditions. We then see if these conditions are strong enough to yield a significant set of principles. If not, we look for further premises equally reasonable. But if so, and these principles match our considered convictions of justice, then so far well and good. But presumably there will be discrepancies. In this case we have a choice. We can either modify the account of the initial situation or we can revise our existing judgments, for even the judgments we take provisionally as fixed points are liable to revision. By going back and forth, sometimes altering the conditions of the contractual circumstances, at others withdrawing our judgments and conforming them to principle, I assume that eventually we shall find a description of the initial situation that both expresses reasonable conditions and yields principles which match our considered judgments duly pruned and adjusted. This state of affairs I refer to as reflective equilibrium.” (John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 18.)



equilibrium aims to harmonize conflicting views, yield a robustly coherent understanding, and achieve a level of objectivity that transcends individual interpretations. This process is normally an ongoing process that accommodates evolving viewpoints from diverse perspectives and continuously refined through the collective efforts of different people engaged in public discourse. By contrast, while PT's first-personal perspective does not reject reflective equilibrium, it differs significantly in its treatment of other perspectives. PT primarily focuses on the pursuit of wisdom as an idealized epistemic goal, rather than if it is a commonly accepted one, making publicly agreed-upon wisdom just one of its possible outcomes. Furthermore, while PT does permit consideration of public debates about wisdom, it remains conservative in suggesting the necessity of such debates. The sort of reflective equilibrium that is commonly encountered is often expected to be transferable through public discourse. However, PT does not require the epistemic agent to move beyond her own perspective. This lack of requirement appears sensible, given that it accommodates the intuitive possibility of idiosyncratic or arcane wisdom that might not withstand public scrutiny — after all, there is little utility in discussing publicly this kind of wisdom that is inaccessible to the majority, even if this conception remains intuitively a viable avenue for attaining wisdom.

The issue at hand, then, should be recapitulated as follows: We began this sub-exploration by considering where the plausible proposals about requirements for wisdom originate, how they are deemed plausible, and how they are related to one another. It seems reasonable to say that they all derive from and are considered plausible from a personal perspective, which is what PT's setting of first-personal perspective implies. However, the situation becomes complex when we aim to interrelate these proposals and formulate a cohesive conception of wisdom, particularly when we encounter mutually incompatible, yet plausible, proposals. We might consider introducing a methodology like reflective equilibrium to clarify and adjust their relationship, but the type of reflective equilibrium that is needed here seems to be different from the type that is usually adopted in public debates about certain other concepts. The reason is that wisdom does not seem to necessarily require reconciling various perspectives into a unified understanding. This suggests that conflicting plausible requirements can be accommodated in separate viewpoints without clashing with each other. For example, the requirement for wise

individuals' social engagement and its negation. However, we might then wonder how to make sense of the relationship between various "plausible" requirements that are merely subjectively so. The underlying point here is that these requirements do have a particular relation to each other. For instance, the basic framework developed in Chapter 1 actually consists of several distinct plausible conditions, and there is no inherent hurdle preventing us from integrating our subsequent findings of plausible requirements for wise individuals into that framework. This implies that they can be linked to form a more comprehensive requirement for the conception of wisdom, not just because they can be listed together, but because they can be rationally integrated. In other words, although the pluralist treatment is simultaneously separating and shielding distinct plausible requirements from one another, there is an implicit tendency for us to transcend individual requirements and consider if the combination can lead to greater plausibility. Therefore, our task regarding the issue of the relationship between various plausible requirements is, in fact, accounting for the reason behind this inclination and the manner to relate them.

The divergence in perspectives also recalls the concerns about the gaps between different perspectives discussed in Chapter 1, bringing us back to the questions about how to understand the divides between expert and folk perspectives, as well as between first-person and third-person perspectives. Indeed, idealization in the eyes of different people can vary significantly. For instance, while many find eternity desirable and a limited lifespan less ideal, this is not universally the case, as evidenced by the popularity of stories depicting miserable eternal life. The difference in opinions highlights how subjective and different idealization can be. Nevertheless, at least in Chapter 1, we did consider the gaps between these perspectives an issue to be addressed. At this point, the connection between these two sets of issues seems to suggest that they can be addressed similarly. Then, can our process theory of wisdom provide this resolution? Before we delve deeper into its examination, we should first gain a better grasp of PT's idealization requirement from a first-personal perspective.

### **(iii) Limited personal perspectives**

Although we have put aside the concern(s) about the idealization that may depend on epistemic facts, it is important to note that there are some concerns deriving from already available natural facts. The most salient concern of this type pertains to one's physical

limitations. We, human beings, are not just limited in a general sense. When it comes to cognition, we have our limits of absorbing information both in relation to our restricted capability of learning and our lifespan. At the same time, there is also a less frequently noticed concern in this regard, related to the duration that humans can sustain reproduction. Acknowledging these limitations should remind us that attaining complete wisdom is a rare, if not entirely impossible, achievement — not just for the individual epistemic agents, but also for the entire enterprise of human epistemology. And this suggests that even the reflective equilibrium sustained by the public discourse cannot be expected to last forever. For our current discussion, the immediate concern does not stem from epistemic agents' inability to attain complete wisdom (since we can view these individuals as partly wise and on their road to fuller wisdom), but rather from the absence of an ultimately idealizable situation to produce a final conception of wisdom. This is not itself a severe problem for PT, for the lack of certainty in this regard cannot be more troublesome than lacking a piece of fact showing what wisdom is. What poses a challenge even for PT is the apparent impossibility for anyone to ultimately decide what constitutes an idealized case. In other words, PT not only allows for the possibility that one might consider an epistemic process ideal when others do not, but also when the epistemic subject could change her mind about what is “ideal” if given just a few more moments for thought — a change that, ironically, will never happen due to her physical limitations.

One might find this situation somehow peculiar, as it suggests that the person in question would negate her own judgment under “appropriate” conditions, and this seems to cast doubt on the reliability or even the tenability of her initial judgment. It is worth noting that this feeling of strangeness does not stem from being confined to a first-personal perspective; relying on public discourse would simply lead to a parallel issue due to the potential for the literal extinction of the community. Moreover, it is evident that, if achievable, the requirement of idealization must be met from one's own constrained viewpoint. On the one hand, as reflected in the traditional internalist pursuit in epistemology and our discussion of the conditions for wise individuals to appreciate their own wisdom, it is counterintuitive to say that an epistemic agent being totally unaware of what an ideal epistemic process is can benefit from an advanced epistemic status gained through this process. On the other hand, because of one's inborn restriction, it is

implausible to suggest that someone could gather comprehensive details of an objectively complete idealized process. Consequently, it seems that we are compelled to conclude that the so-called “idealized epistemic process” is not that ideal as we might have assumed, but rather confined by individual cognitive capacities. And this gives rise to further worries: Could someone deem herself wise without sufficiently deep contemplation? Or, could one be misled by wishful thinking, thereby believing that she has attained wisdom when even minimal reflective effort would suggest otherwise?

It should be acknowledged that this concern is genuine, especially for those sympathetic to the desire for a solid and objective foundation for conceptualizing wisdom. However, within the context of PT, these concerns are less pressing than they may initially appear. There is often an implicit skepticism about the ability of epistemic agents to avoid accepting unqualified epistemic outcomes. But is it really that easy for an individual to delude herself into believing that she has entered an idealized epistemic process when she clearly has not? The answer seems to be negative. First, most people rarely have the opportunity to even contemplate this issue. We seldom reflect upon how we come to our conclusions, let alone have genuine answers to such questioning, and it is this rarity that partly contributes to our valuing of methodological awareness. Second, even when we seriously think about how to idealize our epistemic process, we usually either give up or fail to reach conclusive answers. The issue of how to idealize our epistemic process is complex, and we often lack the time or resources to think it through fully and arrive at a confident conclusion. This becomes particularly evident when we include practical examination into the routine of reflection. While a theoretical conclusion may not always require practical validation, in the case of an idealized epistemic process, it would be more sensible if one puts any trustworthy conclusions to the test in the real world, even repeatedly. And this will understandably take a great amount of time and effort, which not everyone is ready to invest in contemplating this kind of issue. Lastly, even if we do arrive at a seemingly satisfactory answer, we are naturally inclined to question it further, much like we are curious about our surroundings. Take, for example, the success of scientific inquiry. While the scientific method has proven to be an immensely successful epistemic process, this does not prevent us from questioning its status as the ideal approach to making epistemic progress. Human beings may not always make the effort to contemplate what an

idealized epistemic process might be, and may hold divergent opinions on the matter. However, when we do ponder it seriously, it is rare for us to find an answer that is immediately satisfying. Even when we find a tentative answer satisfactory at the moment, we are likely to continue thinking about potential improvements later on.<sup>1</sup> Given that serious scrutiny can lead one to doubt even straightforward truths, it follows that doubts about being in an idealized situation would arise even more naturally. This aligns with our intuition that assessing whether one has attained wisdom is normally much more complicated than assessing whether one knows a piece of fact, even when the degree of knowledge is taken into account. In addition, when we engage in reflection on intriguing questions, we naturally tend to share our opinions with other people and listen to their feedback, and compare our epistemic outcomes with those of others.<sup>2</sup> These all prevent us from easily buying insufficiently reflected results, and there is no exception for thinking about an idealized epistemic process and subsequently wisdom. In any case, although it is possible for people to implausibly assume that they have grasped what an idealized epistemic process is and probably thereby embark on the path to wisdom, it is not often the case that the judgment can be made just arbitrarily.

However, portraying this scenario as if one's evaluation of how ideal an epistemic process is could continue indefinitely and finally become sufficiently plausible is misleading. Individuals have limited time, and normally they do not get to decide when their lives will end. That leads to the abrupt ending of one's thinking faculty that makes insufficiently reflected opinions on this issue possible, and brings us back to the former

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<sup>1</sup> James' commentary on ethical science might, *mutatis mutandis*, be helpful for us to understand the evolution of idealization: "All this amounts to saying that, so far as the casuistic question goes, ethical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its time, and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day. The presumption of course, in both sciences, always is that the vulgarly accepted opinions are true, and the right casuistic order that which public opinion believes in; and surely it would be folly quite as great, in most of us, to strike out independently and to aim at originality in ethics as in physics. Every now and then, however, some one is born with the right to be original, and his revolutionary thought or action may bear prosperous fruit. He may replace old 'laws of nature' by better ones; he may, by breaking old moral rules in a certain place, bring in a total condition of things more ideal than would have followed had the rules been kept." (James, *Will to Believe*, p. 208.) However, it is important to note that the underlying optimistic attitude is not directly applicable to our discussion.

<sup>2</sup> We will see later how this tendency leads to a way to address the issue concerning the relationship among different plausible requirements for wisdom.

concern. PT seems to have to admit that these results that are suddenly unable to be further improved — those conceptions of idealized epistemic process being firmly established and no longer able to be developed or changed by the epistemic agents — are acceptable. That said, does this pose a problem for us? Not necessarily. While we may find it a pity that this thought of idealization loses its opportunity to continue evolving, this situation is not essentially different from that when one has made up her mind to defend a final version of her view of idealized epistemic process in other contexts. Imagine, for instance, an idiosyncratic person becomes determinate about her conclusion of what an idealized epistemic process is and considers that she has attained what this process ultimately aims at. Unfortunately, her view is so unusual that no one in her community finds it tolerable and even deems herself who possesses such thoughts evil. Does this necessarily make the character in question unwise? Of course not, because it is imaginable that as contexts change, e.g., as time changes, people become more open about thoughts and more and more people become attracted to her thoughts and admire her for her wisdom, which in light of PT is the one goal that she deems as worth the name. In other words, personal judgment may not sync with societal judgment. While many, perhaps even the majority, might find this unsettling, it falls upon them to establish and disseminate an alternative view of idealized epistemic processes and wisdom, and then persuade people to adopt their view. And this is nothing strange; after all, as stressed above, one is naturally socially situated, and an epistemic agent who is interested in this issue will be naturally inclined to compare her own conclusion with others'. Although it remains uncontrollable whether she would admit defeat and whether other options could be delivered to her to consider, these factors are not essentially about the conception of wisdom, but how one is influenced when conceiving the concept. Perhaps the truly worrying underlying concern that motivates many people to think that personally decidable idealization of epistemic process as well as wisdom is problematic is how it may have a negative impact (whatever that amounts to) on the mainstream understanding, but it does not seem to be an issue that a theory of wisdom without the support of epistemic facts can help with. What we can do is, at most, make a distinction between personal wisdom and socially accepted wisdom. Nonetheless, what is referred to as “socially accepted” appears to be just a representation of individual opinions, albeit being formed through various mechanisms, such as majority rule,

deference to expert opinions, etc. Therefore, the former concern is not a troublesome issue for PT either.

At this point, it is crucial to emphasize the distinction between personal judgment and societal judgment. This distinction is intimately linked to the ongoing issue concerning the assessment of one's wisdom from various perspectives. In the previously mentioned scenario, the individual in question gains acknowledgment for her wisdom within a specific context. According to this narrative, it seems that the wisdom is first acknowledged by her self-assessment. Does this imply that wisdom must first be established or accepted by herself, then can it be recognized as wisdom by other people? It seems to be the case. As discussed in the first chapter, it would be quite disappointing to discover that a person we consider wise not appreciate her own wisdom. This is, of course, not to say that she has to have the meta-belief that she is wise or that she enjoys relying on her epistemic process. However, if she does not even enjoy and value her epistemic process and her epistemic outcome, or if, when it is pointed out to her that she may be considered wise, she finds the idea intolerable, then it seems absurd to still attribute any wisdom to her. Given the division between personal judgment and others' judgments about one's wisdom, it is conceivable that others might regard someone who does not believe that she is wise as actually being so. Nevertheless, this judgment would presumably be made in the absence of the additional information that the individual in question does not even value her own attainments. While others might deem someone unwise despite her own self-assessment, they cannot rule out the possibility that she might be acknowledged as wise in a different context. Conversely, if someone is dissatisfied with her own epistemic state, it seems unlikely that others would regard her as wise. Thus, it appears that an individual's own valuation of her epistemic state should precede judgments from others regarding her wisdom.

The reason for raising this intriguing point is that it seems to diverge from what PT suggests. According to PT, the subject concerned is the one who determines what constitutes an idealized epistemic process, which should ultimately result in, or be realized through the attainment of wisdom. However, the epistemic subject does not necessarily have to personally undertake this idealized epistemic process. One's idealization clearly

entails an appreciation of the resultant ideal state,<sup>1</sup> and this is to say that in PT, the evaluator's appreciation appears to be conceptually in advance of the evaluated individual's own appreciation. So, how should we understand the relation between the respective appreciations of the evaluator and the evaluated? Is it a reversal of order — from prioritizing the wisdom candidate to prioritizing the wisdom assessor? This would not be reasonable, as it is in direct conflict with the intuition we just mentioned. Has PT introduced an additional layer of requirement? It could have, but the introduced layer seems to be somehow in advance, while it cannot be in advance in order. Could it then be a supplementary layer “above”? This might initially sound odd, but it is comprehensible, in the sense that PT's formulation actually covers both the candidate and the evaluator. The formulation of PT does not require the subject to embark on the path towards wisdom, but it also does not stop her from doing so. If one has in mind what an idealized epistemic process looks like, it should be expectable that when she steps on her journey towards wisdom, she should align her epistemic process with her idealized version. If one's epistemic state is able to be counted as partially or even fully wise, even if she herself is not yet aware of it, it should also be expectable that she finds her epistemic process partly or even fully ideal, as she is expected to appreciate it to a certain extent. Therefore, both the evaluator's approval and the candidate for wisdom's own appreciation are encompassed within PT's framework. This will be clearer if we write it out in this way:

**(PT1):** Subject  $S_1$  judges Subject  $S_2$  as wise, if and only if  $S_2$  has achieved the ultimate epistemic goal of and through an epistemic process that  $S_1$  considers to be ideal. Subjects  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  can be the same person or different individuals.<sup>2</sup>

The union of these two perspectives clearly offers a resolution to the issue surrounding the gap between first-person and third-person perspectives. Furthermore, this union also appears to be helpful in addressing other complex issues, such as the divergence

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<sup>1</sup> But this point might be somewhat more contentious than it initially appears. We will revisit it in the next subsection.

<sup>2</sup> PT1's formulation may remind readers of Whitcomb's theory that also emphasizes the aspect of wisdom as the good end of good epistemic process. However, as the name of his project, “twofold consequentialism,” suggests, his theory prioritizes the acquisition of certain epistemic outcomes that are predetermined, rather than the process of determining what counts as good.



between folk theories and expert theories of wisdom, as well as the question of normativity. The reason for this is that the theory inherently requires evaluation from an individual, which allows the theory to merge different conceptions of wisdom from diverse perspectives while also satisfying the need for a source from which normativity can derive. As some readers may recall from the first chapter, it was proposed that a plausible theory of wisdom is expected to address these issues while also fitting into a plausible basic framework for theorization. If PT1 meets these expectations, then it stands as a plausible theory of wisdom, at least from this perspective. The subsequent subsection will begin by examining this issue. Yet, it should be noted that the question prompting the transition from PT to PT1 remains unaddressed. Namely, why are we inclined to, and how should we interrelate plausible requirements for wisdom from different perspectives?

Shifting to PT1 does not immediately provide an answer to this question. Nevertheless, PT1's emphasis on the first-personal perspective hints at something helpful. Consider, once again, the contention over the requirement for responsible engagement in the society. In light of PT1's focus on first-personal perspectives, the lack of uniformity regarding this requirement can be attributed to divergent individual viewpoints. In other words, the discrepancies in how "definitive" or "clear-cut" each requirement appears are a byproduct of the varying levels of consensus on different requirements. From this angle, the lack of uniform definitiveness is not necessarily a problem to solve; it may simply be a natural outcome of diverse judgments about wisdom. However, how is the main product formed in the first place? It has been indicated that this contentious requirement, along with less contentious and currently highlighted ones, are derived from our epistemic discourse, which can now be seen as a public or societal perspective. It has also been noted that we can trace our learning from the discourse back to personal engagement in this collective practice. Yet, it is easy to overlook that an individual considering something from her own perspective does not automatically yield a public view. For example, in research, surveys are often employed to collect and analyze data in order to reveal people's general orientation regarding a subject. That is to say, merely recognizing the first-personal perspective as an entry point into our epistemic discourse is not enough for us to understand how we derive these more or less plausible requirements from it; a more dynamic

mechanism is needed to bridge the gap between individual judgments and their collective impact.

Our first-personal participation is not lacking an element that could serve this purpose. In fact, we have already seen that if we are interested in the question of how to idealize our epistemic process, or more broadly, in the concept of wisdom, we are naturally inclined to engage in relevant dialogues to exchange views with other people. This inclination effectively motivates us to initiate collective inquiry into what wisdom is, thereby facilitating the convergence or alignment of requirements from various perspectives. PT1 can thus address the remaining question about why we are inclined to interrelate plausible requirements, given a fuller understanding of its first-personal setting. Meanwhile, this understanding serves two additional purposes: first, it suggests a direction for understanding how to interrelate these plausible requirements; and second, it links back to our earlier discussion of epistemic discourse as a collective epistemic process, connecting what we have learned there, specifically the epistemic expressivist line of thought, to our current exploration of PT1. We will examine further details on these aspects as the discussion in the next subsection progresses.

## **1.2 Requirements Set in Different Perspectives**

PT1 offers a method for accommodating various perspectives through a first-personal lens. However, it does not harmonize these perspectives into a single, cohesive viewpoint. Although harmonization may not be our primary objective when discussing wisdom, a question remains about how to interconnect wisdom requirements viewed as plausible from different perspectives. It might be tempting to say that if the nature of these requirements is essentially subjective, then they are simply incomparable or incommensurable. However, this dissertation has revealed some requirements that appear to be widely acceptable. Notably, the process understanding of wisdom provides the foundation for PT1 to integrate other plausible requirements. These requirements do intersect to some extent and somehow shape a credible conceptualization of wisdom. At the end of last subsection, it was emphasized that these requirements are introduced into our epistemic discourse through epistemic agents' engagement with epistemic discourse.

In this subsection, we will further explore the methods of linking these plausible requirements and how this relates to our previous discussion on the epistemic expressivist interpretation of our epistemic discourse as an epistemic process. This exploration will be conducted as we examine whether PT1 can address the plausible requirements listed in the first chapter, thereby being considered as a candidate for a plausible wisdom theory from that perspective. This arrangement is done for two reasons: On the one hand, as discussed in Chapter 1, if PT1 successfully meets the criteria set in Chapter 1, it is then a plausible theory in that light. On the other hand, along this journey, we will see how different plausible requirements presented in Chapter 1 relate to each other and impose not only the basic framework but also other constraints to our conception of wisdom, which serves to indicate how other requirements can be taken into account in the same way.

### 1.2.1 PT1 and the Theoretical Framework

In the first chapter, we concluded that a preliminarily plausible theory of wisdom is expected to reflect three aspects of wisdom: the epistemic character traits and capacities that people expect to find in a wise person, the epistemic objectives that sage candidates are supposed to achieve and the achievement of them, and finally the application of their epistemic outcomes in real life. How does our process theory of wisdom relate to these three aspects? Since we have a requirement of idealization in PT1, we might argue that PT1 well reflects all of them, as all these three aspects are somehow involved in it — Wouldn't we argue that these three aspects of wisdom are already encompassed by an idealized epistemic process? It appears that the answer is affirmative, but there is something curious here. One might wonder if PT1's inclusivity of these three aspects is due to its being overly abstract. Indeed, compared to the theories presented in Chapter 1, PT1 is much less informative. While a lack of informativeness does not negate PT1's plausibility, it does undermine its practical utility. In contrast, while other theories may have their own flaws, they nonetheless offer some practically helpful guidance. They outline necessary conditions for acquiring wisdom, with some even offering detailed steps to take, thereby providing rather useful guidance on the path to wisdom. On the other hand, even if we follow PT1's lead and try to identify what constitutes an idealized epistemic

process for us, what PT1 offers seems to be the vaguest hint on how to become wise. It remains a pressing question as to how exactly an epistemic process should be idealized, not to mention defining what an idealized epistemic process actually is. Even though PT1 does not attempt to guarantee that an idealized epistemic process is ultimately available or achievable, without supplementary information about the subsequent steps to take, it appears practically unhelpful.

However, what is the primary reason for PT1's lack of informativeness? The most influencing factor appears to be its individualistic inclination. If at the end of the day, idealization is something very personal, then how are we supposed to learn greater details from a theory that tries as much as it could to be universally applicable. From this standpoint, one might even argue that the issue of diverging perspectives arises precisely because these theories offer too much specific information, making it difficult to encompass varying idealizations across individual viewpoints. This elevates our discussion to a higher level, where these theories are assessed for a feature that they either share or lack. It might then be recalled that PT1 is purported to derive from a different approach to theorizing wisdom. If the metaepistemological position of PT1 is taken into account, it makes sense why PT1 is more hesitant to offer detailed characterization of wisdom. Unlike mainstream theories that implicitly treat their content as somewhat factual, PT1 takes a different route and thus differentiates itself from more traditional theories. Nevertheless, while this clarifies the emphasis on preparatory work in earlier chapters, it does not preclude us from offering a more detailed first-order account of wisdom despite the differing metaepistemological stance. Although in our line of thought, the content that a theory of wisdom offers is not as guaranteed as in more traditional theories, it is still able to provide a tentatively informative account based on the current epistemic discourse. For instance, given that we do have a rather plausible basic framework for theories of wisdom, we could further specify PT1 as follows:

**(PT2):** Subject  $S_1$  judges Subject  $S_2$  to be wise if and only if: (1)  $S_2$  possesses the epistemic character traits that  $S_1$  considers ideal. (2) These traits enable  $S_2$  to achieve the ultimate epistemic goal that  $S_1$  considers ideal. (3)  $S_2$  has the disposition to act according to the epistemic outcomes that are produced through the exercise of these epistemic character traits and aligned with this ultimate epistemic goal.

By integrating the plausible basic theoretical framework drawn from the mainstream wisdom theories into PT1, we can derive PT2. Although PT2 is still not very concrete, it should adequately illustrate the potential of our process theory of wisdom. The point here, however, is not on this additional maneuver. What is important to note here is that, rather than being based on the basic framework, PT1 is actually absorbing it. That is, when considering their hierarchical relationship, PT1, in effect, precedes the plausible framework. This may be curious at first sight, but if we remember that the process theory of wisdom is developed in a manner distinct from mainstream competitors, then the notion that it is not “based” on the same framework as its competitors becomes understandable. However, is the process theory of wisdom not already based on a refinement of some mainstream thoughts in epistemology? How come this theoretical framework drawn from current major epistemological theories of wisdom is different from the process understanding of wisdom, based on which we arrived at PT1? The only difference appears to lie in the “refinement” aspect. There is indeed no essential difference between different lessons that we learn from the current offerings of our epistemic discourse, but PT1 is not directly a result from them. Rather, PT1 is based on our further consideration of some of these offerings. And the same sort of consideration can be applied to other offerings, including the theoretical framework in question. The remaining question then becomes whether or not this framework is plausible enough to be taken and lead us from PT1 to PT2, and subsequently to more detailed versions of our process theory of wisdom. The answer, interestingly, could be both affirmative and negative.

The basic framework at hand is, of course, plausible to a certain extent, as theories established based on it are at least worth considering. Yet, this is not to say that all the elements involved in it are non-contentious. Consider, for instance, what first comes to our mind when we talk about epistemic character traits? We have epistemic accuracy, epistemic humility and so on in our list, but even if we accept that they are plausible features that wise people embody, is it a given that our understanding of them is unified? Not necessarily. These so-called epistemic virtues are arguably typically discussed as closely tied to human agency, which is expected to manifest in active worldly engagement. However, in some contexts, wisdom is believed to be a divine revelation. An oracle can be considered wise due to her closeness to the divine and her role as a receiver of the divine

gift, with her own generation of any additional reflective belief being considered as a negative element.<sup>1</sup> In this case related to divine wisdom, even if we accept that the oracle in question can somehow embody the intellectual virtue of epistemic accuracy and epistemic humility for her awareness of how little she knows and how great the divine endowment is, these virtues are not exercised in the conventional manner of producing her own epistemic results for reflection. This could then raise doubts about whether divine wisdom can actually be considered the kind of valuable wisdom in ordinary situations, namely, as an epistemic goal that most would consider praiseworthy to aim for. And as for the practical condition, we have already encountered some of the existing disputes. Previously, we glossed over these potential counterarguments against the mainstream framework, treating them as preliminarily dismissible due to the general inclination of mainstream discussion. Nonetheless, following our more recent exploration, it becomes evident that because of the absence of available epistemic facts, these potential concerns are ultimately hard to dismiss. Do we have a practically justifying reason to put them aside, as in how we accepted veritism? If we focus on the discussion of wisdom, it appears that we cannot easily set these concerns aside. Unlike our exploration of veritism, which enriched our understanding of wisdom, the basic theoretical framework seems to muddy our pursuit for a unified understanding of wisdom, such as reconciling divinely received wisdom with commonly attained wisdom.

There appears to be a dilemma here. The first horn is that there is certain plausibility in the mainstream framework of wisdom theories, and simply giving it up is therefore undesirable. The second horn is that maintaining this framework poses difficulty in accommodating alternative, yet credible, conceptions of wisdom. And it seems to be this dilemma that inhibits us from easily arriving at a more detailed wisdom theory. It is not that we cannot formulate an informative account that aligns with the mainstream framework and competing theories, but rather we might have to sacrifice some desirable compatibility among various wisdom concepts if we elaborate to the extent of current mainstream theories. And this points to a viable resolution — going back to PT1. Staying with PT1 allows us to tackle both issues; it enables us to entertain different perspectives

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<sup>1</sup> This might remind us of the credit view of wisdom, which was discussed in Sub-subsection 1.1.1.

through the lens of idealization without forcing a choice between them, and it also allows for the option of adopting a particular perspective from which to develop a more detailed theory. From this angle, PT2 is a specified theory of wisdom from the mainstream perspective, but it does not refrain us from adopting another perspective that may allow a sage candidate not to meet certain mainstream requirements, and it certainly does not stop us from adding more details drawn from the mainstream epistemic discourse either. In essence, a process theory of wisdom is open to incorporating more specific content, and it is thus compatible with the framework that we established in Chapter 1 — though not in the way that one might anticipate. What makes PT1 hesitant to offer more specifics is its need for setting a clear perspective for further elaboration. Once the context of idealization is determined, PT1 has the potential to evolve into informative theories providing practical guidance, just like the theories that we have encountered.

While it is tempting to proceed with setting a specific perspective and develop a satisfactorily refined version of PT1, it may be more important to note that viewing PT1 from this standpoint illuminates its role as reflecting a new way to theorize wisdom, rather than merely serving as another candidate for wisdom theory. It is not only trying to compete with the existing theories of wisdom, but also has the potential to accommodate them. The point here, then, is a shift in focus. Pursuing specific versions of PT1 would not only miss this point but would also be an impractical endeavor, given the limitations on space in this dissertation. On the other hand, the pluralist treatment of the mainstream wisdom theories may recall some of the remaining issues discussed in Chapter 1 regarding the separation between different perspectives. If these issues share the concern of crossing perspectives, and PT1 offers a way out, then PT1 might also offer a solution to those problems. This would then be a compelling reason to argue that PT1 surpasses its competing theories in this respect. We will delve into this issue in the following discussion.

### 1.2.2 PT1 as a Meta-Theory

In Chapter 1, several concerns were raised against empirical studies of wisdom, which are characterized by their use of statistical methods to analyze observational data. Such studies aim to produce results derived solely from the data, without attempting to

influence it. In this approach, theories of wisdom are either derived from or tested against data collected through empirical means, such as surveys, interviews, and experiments. However, this empirical approach necessitates that researchers first identify individuals who are genuinely wise or determine figures commonly accepted as wise, a task that is challenging from the outset. More problematically, a theory of wisdom proposed or developed by researchers may not gain universal acceptance. When limited to observational aspect, there is no mechanism for reconciling differing views, hence the divide between folk and expert theories of wisdom. Additionally, there is also a disconnect between first-person and third-person judgments of wisdom. In other words, an individual might consider herself wise while others do not, or *vice versa*. It is difficult to imagine how an empirical study could arrive at a unifying conclusion merely by reporting on the collected data from these divergent perspectives. The issue seems to stem from a lack of a normative framework that could bring these perspectives together, a point that was also made in Chapter 1. These challenges make it difficult for empirical studies of wisdom to produce a final, unifying theory of wisdom. In contrast, a philosophical approach equipped with normative elements appears to offer a better solution. However, now that we have identified the shared root of issue of limited perspectives, we can see that these are not isolated concerns. In other words, this issue is not limited to empirical studies; it also extends to philosophical theories of wisdom, despite their potential to address some of these concerns through a normative framework. The reason is that even prevalent philosophical theories of wisdom are also bound by their own perspectives, and, therefore, face similar limitations.

In the previous sub-subsection, the issue of different theories' incommensurability was not treated chiefly as inherently problematic, for if we stay at the level of discussing how we may not be able to accept simultaneously incompatible accounts of wisdom, it is not necessarily something negative. However, if the issue of incommensurability comes to the fore due to a lack of criteria for evaluating and comparing different wisdom theories — consider again the case of hermit wisdom versus worldly wisdom — it then feels somewhat arbitrarily to accept one conception of wisdom while dismissing another without a sufficiently justifying reason to do so. And at this point, our process theory of wisdom, specifically PT1 is useful. It accommodates theories developed from diverse perspectives



by introducing a particular normative aspect, which enables comparison between different wisdom theories' specific requirements as well. This normative framework serves as a scaffold for us to acquire appropriate reasons for embracing or rejecting certain concepts of wisdom on the market. Hence, our approach provides a higher-order normative framework for us to assess various first-order requirements. As such, our process theory of wisdom can respond to the issue of normativity, which is followed by the issue of the gap between folk and expert opinions, and the issue of the gap between first-person and third-person judgment by introducing a normative requirement as other philosophical accounts, and outperforms other philosophical theories of wisdom by providing a higher-order normative requirement for further comparison. It should be noted that this meta-level requirement is distinct from our earlier discussion of metaepistemology. The latter concerns our first-order epistemic discourse as a whole, whereas the former focuses primarily on the candidates of wisdom theories, especially the normative ones, that are under scrutiny. That said, we will see how they converge at the end of this sub-subsection.

There are three additional merits of the process theory of wisdom's introduction of the higher-order criteria:

(i) First, in light of perspectival idealization, PT1 can encompass not only various personal perspectives but also more abstract perspectives. For example, PT1 is able to cover theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom respectively as wisdom from the theoretical and practical perspectives, and likewise for general wisdom and domain-specific wisdom. In this context, the notion of "perspective" can be understood in two ways: one as an impersonation or modeling based on personal, first-personal perspectives, and the other as the addition of a subject matter onto the idealized epistemic process for further specification from a first-personal perspective. This enables PT1 to account for a broader range of conceptions of wisdom, thereby enhancing its theoretical flexibility while maintaining its contextual specificity. Such capacity also provides clarity on two more points mentioned in Chapter 1: First, it refines our understanding of the relation between general wisdom and wisdom of particular domains. It has been suggested that they are applications of the same basic idea to different domains, and this relation can now be more specifically illustrated. According to PT1, wisdom in different domains can be interpreted as the driving force behind idealized epistemic processes unique to the corresponding

domains, with wisdom of how to live well most frequently mentioned without qualification for its generality. Moreover, this understanding also helps to explain why the term “wisdom” may be more intuitively applied to some domains over others. That is, the degree to which an epistemic process within a domain can be idealized affects the suitability of introducing the concept of wisdom. For example, it is more intuitively natural to say wisdom of management than wisdom of mathematics, for the other side of ideal is unreal — the more the best epistemic process of a domain is decidable, the less it depends on personal idealization, and the less applicable is the term “wisdom.”<sup>1</sup>

The second point concerns how one’s wisdom is assessed, whether as a general epistemic state, or in relation to a particular decision. Thanks to PT1’s focus on idealization, it becomes more understandable now why one might initially consider a specific decision as wise — because it somewhat reflects the state of the general epistemic process behind it. However, once further considerations regarding idealization are taken into account, it is clear that one’s overall epistemic state is more important in evaluating whether an epistemic subject is genuinely wise or not. While these points may have been addressed in Chapter 1, PT1’s succinctness in accounting for them adds to its theoretical utility.

(ii) The second merit of PT1 as a meta-theory is that it addresses some lingering concerns identified in Chapter 1. In Chapter 1, a problem within the mainstream framework was highlighted: the presupposition of epistemic target objects. After an extensive discussion on reversing the priority between one’s epistemic desires and one’s epistemic ends, it becomes clear that this issue boils down to the absence of available epistemic facts guiding what our epistemic efforts should aim for. By turning to our own epistemic desires, we do not need to rely on such assumptions and can thus avoid the potential problem. However, this problem was initially presented in a more complex manner, or more specifically, in its early stages because we had not yet fully explored it. It was proposed that the first aspect of this problem concerns the deeper reason within the mainstream theoretical framework that engenders incommensurability — the difficulty of comparing

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<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, not to say that the term just cannot be applied. More interestingly, we might find the term “wisdom” useful in specific domains where the best epistemic strategy is closely tied to an epistemic goal that transcends the typical boundaries of that domain. An example would be epistemic objectives that intersect with ethical or social responsibilities.

the epistemic objectives proposed by different theories of wisdom. This aspect was just addressed in the discussion of PT1's pluralist treatment of incommensurability. What may complicate our understanding here is the recurring use of "incommensurability," a term applied to both the challenge of reconciling varying conceptions of idealized epistemic process (e.g., theories that adopt the mainstream framework and those against it) and the unification of different presumptions regarding what wise people are supposed to achieve in their epistemic journey. Yet, the relation between these two uses is quite straightforward: the former encompasses the latter. Therefore, PT1 helps to resolve this aspect of the problem of presupposing epistemic ends, albeit indirectly, as part of a larger issue that it manages to address.

The next aspect of this problem involves the theoretical burden linked to presumed epistemic target objects. At its core, the problem is that a theory of wisdom might presuppose a requirement that is so theoretically demanding for a sage candidate to fulfill through an epistemic process that it appears unrealistic. This presents a conundrum: on the one hand, an overly demanding requirement seems disadvantageous; on the other hand, a proponent might argue that wisdom, as an ideal epistemic state, need not be conceptualized in a realistic way. However, at this juncture, readers may notice that this dilemma directs us back to the need for an additional criterion for evaluating and comparing these conflicting claims while acknowledging their limited plausibility. With PT1 as a reference, we can handle this issue in a similar manner. That is, we can assess these claims through the lens of idealization and preserve their plausibility within their own respective perspectives. As a result, both sets of intuitions can be accommodated: one might challenge a theoretically demanding conception of wisdom for not being ideal, while, from a personal standpoint, such a requirement could still be considered reasonable.

**(iii)** The two aspects just mentioned appear closely related to the overarching issue that we have already discussed and for which we have proposed a general solution. Therefore, applying this pre-established solution to these subsidiary concerns may not contribute anything fundamentally new or substantial. However, the third aspect of the problem of predetermined epistemic ends pertains to a distinct concern that does not fall under the umbrella of the previously discussed general problem, thereby revealing a third additional benefit for adopting our process approach to theorizing wisdom.

On the surface, the third aspect of the problem arises when too much emphasis is placed on what epistemic agents must achieve in order to become wise, thereby marginalizing their actual efforts in theories that are supposed to mirror their epistemic process. This concern was initially articulated as stemming from the worry that what wise individuals are supposed to achieve is beyond their control. Consequently, they cannot sufficiently distinguish themselves from those who are less qualified in terms of their epistemic character traits and capacities once both groups attain the externally preset goal. This reflects an underlying worry about the indistinguishability between two groups of people who achieve the same objective without possessing the same set of epistemic properties. The worry suggests two key points: First, we tend to find it unsatisfying that the acquisition of the predetermined epistemic target alone can decide one's level of wisdom. Second, we also tend to think that it is important to incorporate certain epistemic character traits and capacities into the requirements for wisdom. Therefore, the issue is not solely about the emphasis placed on the epistemic goals to be achieved, but also on other elements that should be part of the epistemic process leading to wisdom. If pursued further, a plausible theory of wisdom is expected to highlight epistemic agents' epistemic efforts, a point already noted earlier. However, as demonstrated in the example of an oracle gaining wisdom from revelation, it is not necessarily the case that one's own epistemic efforts are appreciated in the assessment of one's wisdom. From the standpoint of a process theory of wisdom, the concern, then, is not merely about predetermined epistemic ends, which are just one component of a theoretical framework, but essentially about the construction of the framework for the desired epistemic process.

The point here, of course, is not to reiterate PT1's pluralist treatment of the issue of building a theoretical framework, which we have just now examined, but to address what remains concerning the epistemic agent's role in this process. While the element of epistemic character traits and capacities required by the mainstream framework surely captures one way in which epistemic agents can be involved in the wisdom-conducive process, it seems incorrect to suggest that omitting this element renders epistemic agents unwise in the case of divine wisdom from the perspective of people who believe in such wisdom. What is more interesting to note is that, even in this latter case, the epistemic subject is expected to exhibit a level of epistemic agency and ability, particularly her

(potential) recognition of what she receives as divine wisdom and her (potential) appreciation of what she receives. Viewing the issue from this angle, the essence of the worry seems to concern how to bridge the gap between a minimally acceptable level of the epistemic agent's awareness, or conscious engagement in the ideal epistemic process and the acquisition of wisdom. This intuition reveals a commonly held expectation that is apparently shared across various perspectives: the anticipation of a direct link between epistemic agency and its resulting outcomes. Moreover, this is something that, if we narrowly focus on the term "epistemic process" without considering its relationship with the epistemic agent, could be easily overlooked. Therefore, it appears favorable to think about how to accommodate it in our process theory of wisdom, specifically, in a more inclusive manner than in the basic framework.

We might find comfort in the fact that the formulation of PT1 allows epistemic agents to evaluate one's epistemic process, thereby immediately being able to address this consideration by adding a requirement for the evaluation to be appreciative (while an accurate understanding of one's own process is already implied when the judgment is correct, thereby covering the requirement for recognition). But recall that PT1 unifies first-person and third-person judgements of wisdom by setting placeholders of epistemic subjects and allowing them to represent the same person or different individuals. In the case where the epistemic subject in question judges her own epistemic state, it appears straightforward that her appreciation of her epistemic process is entailed by her acknowledging it as ideal. Nonetheless, when there are two different subjects involved and Subject  $S_1$  makes the judgment about Subject  $S_2$ , it is unclear how  $S_1$ 's appreciation of  $S_2$ 's epistemic process means that  $S_2$ 's self-appreciation is guaranteed. This guarantee, of course, does not mean that by being considered wise by  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$  will then appreciate her own epistemic state. Rather, it should mean that  $S_1$ 's judgment that  $S_2$  is wise entails that  $S_1$  believes that  $S_2$  appreciates what is being evaluated, mirroring the intuition that if  $S_1$  were aware that  $S_2$  does not appreciate her epistemic state,  $S_1$  would not consider her wise. In any case,  $S_1$ 's judgment does not automatically make  $S_2$ 's self-appreciation happen. And it is not difficult to see that PT1 centers almost exclusively on the agency of the evaluating subject  $S_1$ . Without a direct link from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , the latter's agency is left ambiguous or even

neglected. But it seems that it should be the agency of the evaluated epistemic subject  $S_2$  that needs to be paid more attention to in our theory.

It would be misleading to think that the underlying problem here is that PT1 cannot ensure that the evaluated epistemic agent will indeed appreciate her own epistemic state. From the outset, PT1 aims to outline how someone would be considered wise. Therefore, PT1 can preclude those who do not meet the conditions necessitated by the evaluator's conception of an ideal epistemic process to be taken into account. In other words, even though PT1 does permit the attribution of wisdom to individuals who may not even be engaged in an epistemic process in a minimally acceptable sense, it ensures that the evaluated epistemic subject meets this criterion when she falls under its formulation. The truly questionable aspect here is that even though the requirement of appreciation can be subsumed under the vague requirement of idealization, PT1 cannot guarantee against entertaining rare perspectives, in which the conception of an ideal epistemic process diverges from widely-held expectations — such as the expectation for minimally acceptable engagement. Furthermore, it is also hard to see how PT1 avoids marginalizing the evaluated epistemic agent's actual engagement. After all, no matter how varied the candidates are, what ultimately matters in PT1 is the evaluator.

It might initially seem that what PT1 needs are more concrete examples showing that an ideal epistemic process is unlikely to coexist with its epistemic agent's lack of active engagement, and the evaluated epistemic subject's agency somehow manifests in PT1 regardless of the formulation. However, arguing in this direction does not essentially change the secondary status of the evaluated epistemic subject in PT1. More importantly, even if we accept that the evaluated person's agency presents itself in the evaluation, lacking the support of available epistemic facts makes it difficult to rule out a scenario where no epistemic agency is required. That is to say, it is ultimately difficult to ensure the evaluated epistemic subject manifests her agency as seen from the evaluator's perspective. As epistemic agents, we are generally inclined to view knowledge as positive and ignorance as negative — a sentiment supported by various sources, including perhaps the most innate epistemic desire, curiosity. However, is knowing more invariably a good thing? When we look at someone dying, tormented beyond recognition by chronic depression due to awareness of her own epistemic limitations and insatiable desire for more knowledge,

can we still confidently claim that she would not be better off in a state of complete ignorance? In such cases, it seems that ignorance, usually an undesirable epistemic state, holds a more favorable position than painful knowledge. Should we find ourselves in this person's situation, might we not, even if only for a transient moment, think that an ideal epistemic process is the elimination of the process itself?

This is a sophisticated question, and here is not the place to decide the answer (if a decision could ever be reached). The case already serves its purpose as long as it raises the slightest hint of doubt. That is, while there is a drive here for relying on more concrete evidence or even objective facts to determine whether an epistemic agent should manifest epistemic agency to attain wisdom, it is unclear where it could specifically point. Consequently, it is difficult to definitively ensure that the evaluated epistemic subject in PT1 will manifest a minimally acceptable level of agency, based solely on limitations imposed by the evaluator's perspective. This point resonates with our previous discussion on how to accommodate other plausible requirements by further specifying PT1. Yet, we are now advancing towards something more profound. The issue at our hand here is that PT1 seems to be required to highlight a kind of epistemic agency in its formulation, whereas PT1's focus on the evaluator is not providing sufficient support to require the evaluated epistemic subjects to be like this — that is, a normative force that suggests sage candidates ought to do so. However, while identifying a corresponding fact is often what we rely on for support, it is not the only source from which this type of normative force can derive. We should already be familiar with this topic. Indeed, the tension here is quite similar to the one in the case of metaepistemological realism that we are now already familiar with through our previous discussion, specifically the exploration in Chapter 3 — the tension between realists' attempt to justify epistemological theses on epistemic facts and the lack of evidence of the availability of such things. Remember, however, that our train of thought that brought us here solved this tension by providing an alternative to understand and justify our epistemic linguistic practice that does not depend on epistemic facts but its practical outcome. By separating the explaining reason and the justifying reason, we are allowed not to think that this normative force must inherit its legitimacy from its source and can thus accept that it simply derives from our epistemic desires as it does. In other words, there is no need to ask for external aid; if we consider the requirement

of self-appreciation a part of an ideal epistemic process, this can just be because that we deem it to be a part of the most desirable epistemic process, rather than some supporting facts limiting our imagination to this sole possibility.

The immediate implication of this is that we can embrace the requirement of self-appreciation as it is normally a plausible intuition manifested in the practically helpful epistemic discourse. We can expect a more specified version of PT1 to reflect this intuition, just like reflecting other mainstream requirements. Nevertheless, this is nothing new for us to learn. What is more interesting is that by closely linking the epistemic expressivist understanding of our epistemic linguistic practice to our current issue, we note that PT1 not only addresses the requirement of idealization as a higher-order supplementary element relative to its competitors but also adopts a more general treatment of the source of normative force, derived from its second-order epistemological stance. And this is the third additional benefit of PT1 functioning as a meta-theory. In Chapter 1, philosophers were only anticipated to provide theories that are more capable of accounting for the normative aspect of the concept of wisdom, but it was not required to explain how such a force could originate. By positioning PT1 as a meta-theory that accommodates wisdom theories from different perspectives, as well as drawing on our epistemic expressivist line of thought, we can now make clear the source of the normative force. Furthermore, compared to mainstream metaepistemological realist theories, we introduce this source in a more plausible manner.

An additional point here is that by clarifying our metaepistemological position's impact on our current discussion, we can also identify an agent who is constantly actively present in our conceptualization of wisdom. This agent is not introduced by the requirement imposed by the evaluator in PT1, but rather by the setting of the evaluator itself. Revealing this active epistemic subject may offer an alternative answer to how epistemic agency connects to the idealization of the epistemic process. Namely, there is indeed an inseparable epistemic agency involved in the concept of wisdom, and PT1 succeeds in highlighting this agency. However, it does so not by emphasizing the agency of the evaluated subject  $S_2$  in pursuing wisdom, but by starting from, and unfolding through, the perspective of the evaluating agent  $S_1$ . We can preliminarily distinguish between the personal engagement of  $S_2$  and the personal engagement of  $S_1$ . Since  $S_1$  also stands for an epistemic agent, is  $S_1$ 's



engagement in the evaluation also a form of personal engagement? This appears to be the case in a broader sense of “engagement.” The extent of this engagement, however, may vary. When  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are the same individual, their engagement in the epistemic process aligns. Conversely, when  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are distinct,  $S_1$ 's engagement takes on a different character from that in the former scenario. It might even permit a minimal engagement in making the evaluation, as one's judgment of others' wisdom can be separated from her believing so. For instance, we may judge that an epistemic agent, constrained by her temporal and spatial conditions, falls short of the ideal epistemic process that we might enjoy, yet can still be deemed wise within the context of her specific circumstances (or, as argued in Chapter 4, the subject field of the kind of wisdom that is being evaluated), whereas we do not in fact believe the content of her wisdom, as we enjoy relatively better epistemic conditions that can already exclude much of her epistemic outcome; or, we suspend our belief in what we judge to be ideal because there is no evidence showing it to be so; etc.

This subsection began with an exploration of how to connect PT1 and the basic framework for theorizing wisdom outlined in Chapter 1. We had two objectives: First, examining whether PT1 meets the requirements set in Chapter 1 and thereby qualifies as a plausible theory of wisdom; and second, considering how to interrelate various plausible requirements for wisdom, specifically in light of PT1. The exploration quickly led us to apply PT1 to considerations raised in Chapter 1. Along this journey, we also looked at how different requirements could be harmonized, given that these considerations often pertain to certain plausible requirements for wisdom. To this point, much of this exploration is complete, and we seem to have developed a response to the second objective. That is, PT1, based on a metaepistemological epistemic expressivist stance, functions as a meta-theory. It sets an evaluator in its formulation as the source for introducing a normative requirement concerning an ideal epistemic process. This allows for a unified understanding and comparison of various plausible wisdom-related requirements while preserving their uniqueness and potential conflicts by accommodating differing perspectives. Under this interpretation, PT1 offers a plausible way to link various requirements, including both those that we have already discussed and those that we may encounter in the future.

As for the first task, which involves tackling Chapter 1's key considerations, our response can be summarized as follows: Regarding the absence or insufficient presence of normative bridging, and the ensuing issue of accommodating diverse perspectives, PT1 provides a more plausible solution through its pluralist approach. This approach employs a higher-order normative requirement for idealization, providing a means to interrelate various perspectives and assess theories of wisdom that are mutually incommensurable but still relatively plausible. Moreover, this approach allows PT1 to interpret both general and domain-specific wisdom, as well as wisdom applicable to one's entire life and wisdom relevant to a particular moment in a unified manner. It also addresses the concern of overly rigorous, predetermined epistemic goals, while clarifying the source of its normative force. In short, PT1 manages to address these considerations raised in the first chapter and, in some respects, outperforms its competitors.

If these conclusions are sound, we have only one remaining issue to discuss for this exploration: the matter of the practical aspect of the concept of wisdom. If we can address this consideration as well, then we will, at the same time, also complete the remaining first objective.

### 1.2.3 PT1 and Practical Action

In most part of this dissertation, we have been focusing on the epistemic aspect of the concept of wisdom. However, despite the understandable attention given to its epistemic aspect, especially in light of troubling counterexamples that challenge the common expectation for wise people to achieve their intended goals by taking actions, it was already mentioned in Chapter 1 that wisdom nonetheless requires some elements that are either non-epistemic or not epistemic in a standard sense. For most people, wisdom involves more than just the epistemic; it also involves having appropriate emotions and feelings, doing the right things, etc. These elements can arguably be grouped under the practical aspect of wisdom, and they are also crucial to a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be wise. Ignoring them would thus be a significant omission in any theory that seeks to account for wisdom.

While this raises concerns about PT1's limited focus on the epistemic aspect of wisdom, it also suggests a link between the state of being wise and the expectation for the possessor of such a state to perform in an extraordinary manner. If it is this link that needs to be reflected in theories, then it is not inherently problematic for PT1 to remain based on the epistemic consideration of wisdom. One possible but radical response to this concern is to erase the distinction between the epistemic and the practical domain altogether. After all, if we reject the kind of thinking that there is somehow an independent "self" that can be abstracted away from one's body, then one's cognitive activity is just one form of one's bodily action, which is just one form of physical movement happening in the world. Though this radical approach may be too extreme to fully expound in this dissertation, we can still conceive of wisdom as an epistemic state that extends into the practical realm. A case in point is Grimm's account, where the practical aspect of wisdom is addressed under the knowledge condition — that is, attaining wisdom entails specific knowledge, which in turn entails corresponding actions. The potential worry here is that Grimm's account requires us to accept a somewhat non-standard definition of knowledge, one that necessitates both the possession of a certain epistemic status and corresponding action. However, it is conceivable that one may possess certain knowledge yet fails to act accordingly. At this juncture, PT1's condition of idealization seems to offer a resolution: If we do not need to be restricted by the use of "knowledge," but can use an expanded, more inclusive or even advanced epistemic status that is achieved through an idealized epistemic process and is able to unify both the epistemic aspect and the practical aspect, then the problem seems to resolve itself.

That said, even if we ignore that this is such an abstract and somewhat uninformative solution, or even if we accept the concept of knowledge that Grimm employs, which unites the step of knowing (an epistemic state) and the step of acting (a practical state), there is still a further step to take in order to fulfill our intuitive expectation for wise individuals, which is arriving at the anticipated outcomes by truly possessing such unified knowledge. In other words, there are two more steps to cover in order to provide a theory of wisdom that does not only take into account the epistemic aspect of wisdom, but also its practical aspect. What is important to note is that it seems to be the latter step that is more challenging to address, as that is what the looming counterexamples are directly targeting:

Whether we accept, appreciate, and apply what wisdom guides for our actions seems to be within our own reach — that is, something inner and controllable; however, whether our actions can achieve their intended goals are not up to us. The difficulty here apparently lies in the same physical form shared by ordinary people and wise people: Gaining wisdom does not essentially change the physical limit posed on human beings, and there are just too many things that are uncontrollable by human beings. Even though wisdom may guide its possessor's actions more effectively, it does not thereby grant her the power to control the actual outcomes of those actions. As Donald Davidson observes:

We must conclude, perhaps with a shock of surprise, that our primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, mere movements of the body — these are all the actions there are. We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of consequence seems to be inevitable, and usually all we could say is “Unfortunately, this is it.” In the first chapter, we have concluded that the basic framework drawn from mainstream theories of wisdom on the table does not necessitate the condition of outcomes corresponding to the actions taken. We have provided some weaker interpretations for the intuitive anticipation of results from wisdom-guided actions as alternative options. However, there is an even more acute feeling of misfortune when it comes to wise people. Specifically, when the notion of “ideal” enters the discussion, the vexing nature of these counterexamples becomes more evident. The concern is that even if we achieve wisdom — an epistemic status in this context being perfect, flawless, and ideal, the highest epistemic status that human being can ever attain — we still find ourselves constrained by uncontrollable external factors and seem to be so powerless to do anything with it. In ordinary situations, wise people are certainly more epistemically advantaged and generally outperform ordinary people in various respects (or at least when all things considered), and are thus distinguished from ordinary people. Nonetheless, in an abnormal, extreme situation, they appear to be as powerless as ordinary people. All the information that they possess and actions that they take lose their effectiveness when circumstances are unfortunately set against them. This, in effect, blurs the distinction between the wise and

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Davidson, "Agency (1971)," in *Essays on Actions and Events: Philosophical Essays Volume 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 59.

the ordinary, for as mentioned in Chapter 1, it is difficult to insist that someone is wise when she fails to achieve anything.

This is a disquieting conclusion. But, at the same time, it seems to suggest that, despite the counterexamples, we intuitively expect wisdom to make some difference in practice. The issue, then, becomes a question about how wisdom can distinguish the wise from the ordinary, even when both are subject to external factors. At this point, drawing on an opposing element appears to offer a solution — specifically, the traditional view that sees the internal space as accessible and controllable by us, regardless of external circumstances. If we can highlight a significant difference in practice between the wise and the ordinary from this internal perspective, then this provides a foundation for PT1 to incorporate practical aspects as well as epistemic ones.

The underlying concern here lies in that while the practical aspect is crucial for wisdom, it gives rise to a theoretical dilemma. On the one hand, if we require the wise to successfully carry out their wisdom, we encounter counterexamples that challenge this expectation. On the other hand, if we only require them to apply their epistemic judgments while ignoring the corresponding practical outcomes, we run into the worry about endorsing a form of “wisdom” that may never be actualized in reality. Central to this is the need to distinguish wise people by their possession of wisdom, even when the application of such wisdom does not lead to their intended goals due to abnormal conditions. In other words, this failure should not be attributable to their wisdom or their personal shortcomings. If we relate this concern to the epistemic aspect and seek support therein, then a direction for argumentation emerges. Although wise people may not succeed in achieving their goals in practice, they nonetheless possess a certain epistemic status that could, at least potentially, inform them that they have made a wise judgment, and their actions are in accordance with that judgment. And, in this context, what we are talking about is, in fact, an important concept in the discussion of the philosophy of action — practical knowledge. To put crudely, practical knowledge is knowing what one is doing. Introducing this notion should effectively help distinguish wise people from ordinary individuals. After all, the latter lack the knowledge or information needed not only to ascertain that their actions are wisely chosen, but also to confirm that what they are doing is the wise action. This concept is often known because of Anscombe’s account of intentional actions:

[W]e can say that where (a) the description of an event is of a type to be formally the description of an executed intention (b) the event is actually the execution of an intention (by our criteria) then the account given by Aquinas of the nature of practical knowledge holds: Practical knowledge is ‘the cause of what it understands’, unlike ‘speculative’ knowledge, which ‘is derived from the objects known’. This means more than that practical knowledge is observed to be a necessary condition of the production of various results; or that an idea of doing such-and-such in such-and-such ways is such a condition. It means that without it what happens does not come under the description — execution of intentions [...].<sup>1</sup>

The basic idea here seems to be that an agent’s practical knowledge of her actions constitutes the intentional feature of what she does. In essence, if one is acting intentionally in a certain way, as opposed to moving her body unconsciously or being controlled, then she must “know” what the action is supposed to be like.<sup>2</sup> For instance, according to Anscombe, if one has written something on a blackboard, to recount what she has written, she should directly state the content she had in mind, rather than scrutinize what has actually materialized, even if she wrote with her eyes closed.<sup>3</sup> Although Anscombe’s interpretation of practical knowledge is relatively restricted, and there is still debate about what she actually meant,<sup>4</sup> it is intuitive that we do possess a certain form of knowledge in intentional actions, gained through the use of our practical faculties.<sup>5</sup> What is difficult to address is how to maintain that such “knowledge” remains genuine when practical outcomes differ from expectations or when more complex scenarios arise. These include actions not aligning with intentions (we may have an intention, but the bodily movement in accordance is not due to such an intention) or goals not being met in the intended way

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<sup>1</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, pp. 87-88 (§48).

<sup>2</sup> Although here is not the place to discuss Anscombe’s view in detail, it might be important to note that this does not imply that the subject must be fully aware of what she is doing in advance (because, in another case, Anscombe clearly thinks that one can gradually reveal her intention under persistent questioning of “Why?” (§23). However, whether Anscombe holds that one’s unnoticed intention gives rise to her action causally is debatable.

<sup>3</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 82 (§45).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the intentional action that she takes into account seems to be primarily immediate performance (§48) and should be “known without observation” (§8). This leaves long-term and on-going actions, and other helpful epistemic processes aside, though this is understandable for certain theoretical goal that cannot be covered here.

<sup>5</sup> Juan S. Piñeros Glasscock and Sergio Tenenbaum, "Action," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Spring 2023). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/action/>.

(we may have an intention and act correspondingly, yet the intended goal is accomplished by something else that intrudes).<sup>1</sup> This issue becomes particularly complex when attempting to explain how ordinary people might generally possess such knowledge. It appears that any recognized means to justify a belief could prove overly demanding for some individuals.

However, this issue becomes more tractable when we limit our focus to wise individuals, especially as conceptualized by PT1 as ideal inquirers who have attained the highest or the most precious epistemic good. It is self-evident that information about what one is doing — that is, a clear answer to “What am I doing?” — is desirable.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, an ideal epistemic agent should inherently possess this level of self-awareness. And this needs not to be considered as an overly demanding requirement, for, depending on how high the standard is set by “idealization,” this knowledge can be derived from various epistemic processes such as observation of one’s own body and her environment, inferences from past experiences, considerations of one’s actions in a more general scenario (as discussed in the first chapter concerning the weak reading of wisdom’s reliability), etc. In the ideal scenario, even a story that Anscombe would consider excessively demanding appears to make sense:

Imagine someone directing a project, like the erection of a building which he cannot see and does not get reports on, purely by giving orders. His imagination (evidently a **superhuman** one) takes the place of the perception that would ordinarily be employed by the director of such a project. He is not like a man merely considering speculatively how a thing might be done; such a man can leave many points unsettled, but this man must settle everything in *a* right order. *His* knowledge of what is done is practical knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Interpreting the intuitive expectation for wise people in the practical domain as an epistemic requirement of practical knowledge serves dual purposes. It is not only a defensive strategy to avoid counterexamples arising from rare cases (where these

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<sup>1</sup> Namely, the two situations of deviant causal chains discussed in Davidson, “Freedom to Act (1973),” pp. 78-79.

<sup>2</sup> I suppose that this is self-evident, for not being able to answer to the question “Do you know what you are doing?” seems to be obviously embarrassing.

<sup>3</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 82 (§48). Emphasis in bold is mine.

requirements might be ignored), but it also ensures that in normal, ordinary circumstances, wise people can meet expectations by possessing such knowledge, thereby mirroring the intuition positively. By incorporating the notion of idealization, PT1 responds to the remaining concern about the practical aspect in wisdom theorization by differentiating wise individuals from ordinary people through their grasp of practical knowledge related to wise action. While this may not be the exclusive way to address the issue, PT1 does provide a viable solution, and thus apparently either outperforms or is on par with other competing theoretical approaches in this regard. Therefore, the first objective of this subsection is also met: PT1 is able to address the last consideration raised in Chapter 1 as well, and is, thus, a plausible theory of wisdom, at least from Chapter 1's perspective.

### 1.3 A Process Theory of Wisdom

The discussion of this section shows how the following formulation of a process theory of wisdom:

**(PT1):** Subject  $S_1$  judges Subject  $S_2$  as wise, if and only if  $S_2$  has achieved the ultimate epistemic goal of and through an epistemic process that  $S_1$  considers to be ideal. Subjects  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  can be the same person or different individuals.

is capable of meeting the requirements outlined in Chapter 1 — incorporating the proposed theoretical framework and addressing, or even surpassing other competing theories in resolving the issues highlighted. PT1 satisfies these requirements in a unique manner. Unlike mainstream approaches, PT1 functions as a meta-theory that imposes a higher-order requirement, namely, the requirement of idealization from a first-personal perspective. It allows us to critically examine and interrelate our epistemic judgments about wisdom within a higher-order normative framework. PT1 also harmonizes the divergences among disparate wisdom theories from different perspectives, ranging from first/third-person perspectives to general/specific-domain perspectives. While PT1 primarily focuses on the epistemic aspect of wisdom, it offers solutions for the practical dimension through the inclusion of practical knowledge. Furthermore, grounded in our epistemic expressivist



line of thought, PT1 manages to clarify the source of its normative force. Therefore, PT1 emerges as a plausible, if not more compelling, option for the theorization of wisdom.

However, while PT1 is capable of meeting the theoretical requirements set in the first chapter by abstracting away from a limited perspective, it also must adopt a specific perspective to offer meaningful guidance in practice. This reiterates the importance of introducing a specific evaluator. Just like in the comparison between hermits' wisdom and mundane wisdom, we may intuitively acknowledge the wisdom in both approaches. Nevertheless, upon reflection, it becomes evident that they are actually in conflict. When we choose one of these paths, we cannot genuinely align with the opposing approach. Drawing on PT1, we can understand this phenomenon as arising from the distinct perspectives of hermits and socially engaged individuals, allowing us to appreciate their respective forms of wisdom to a certain extent. Yet, if we are serious about choosing a path to begin our journey towards wisdom, then we must adopt a particular perspective and reject views that are incompatible with it. This, of course, does not mean that we cannot change paths later, or that we are obliged to consciously select a starting point for our wisdom journey. But we do need to adhere to a perspective that provides a largely consistent story regarding a particular idealized epistemic process (I say "largely" consistent because some people may consider a "leap of faith" as also contributing to a form of wisdom).

On the other hand, the emphasis on first-personal perspective also leads to a way for understanding the relationship between various plausible requirements related to wisdom. In light of PT1, different requirements can be understood in respect to their contribution to the idealization of one's epistemic process. With the process understanding as a guide, other requirements can be interpreted as more detailed specifications that enrich theories based on PT1. Such additional requirements include, but are not limited to, those discussed in this dissertation: being compatible with a basic framework, aiming at epistemically grounded truth, etc. Some of these requirements are widely accepted and are consistent across different perspectives. Others may not be universally accepted but can still be evaluated in terms of how their fulfillment results in an epistemic process considered ideal from a specific perspective. For instance, engaging responsibly with the epistemic community is probably required from the perspective of worldly wisdom,

whereas not from a hermit's perspective. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that this does not indicate the existence of a definitive epistemic fact determining their precise relationship; rather, it is a reconsideration of the plausible requirements that have emerged in epistemic discourse.

With the help of this understanding, or these understandings, it is not difficult to see how we can also accommodate different theories or accounts of wisdom on the table. Take Ryan's Deep Rationality Theory (DRT) for example:

Person S is wise at time t iff at time t:

- (1) S has a wide variety of epistemically justified beliefs on a wide variety of valuable academic subjects and on how to live rationally (epistemically, morally, and practically).
- (2) S has very few unjustified beliefs and is sensitive to his or her limitations.
- (3) S is deeply committed to both:
  - (a) Acquiring wider, deeper, and more rational beliefs about reality (subjects listed in condition 1).
  - (b) Living rationally (practically, emotionally, and morally).<sup>1</sup>

In the first chapter, we have discussed some particularly contentious elements involved in DRT, such as the demanding requirement for wise individuals to possess epistemically justified beliefs, which seems to unnecessarily preclude epistemic agents considered wise but lacking in extensive "knowledge" due to various reasons. However, drawing on PT1, we can now give a more appropriate evaluation of DRT. That is, it is indeed understandable why DRT has its appeal: its stringent criteria for wisdom are intuitively acceptable in a modern, academically developed context, where the counterarguments to this view rarely apply. And, in fact, in economically and culturally developed communities, an epistemic agent can hardly be considered wise if she does not possess a wide range of epistemically justified beliefs. Since such an environment provides ample opportunity for acquiring a broad spectrum of basic academic knowledge, it is reasonable to expect an individual raised in these circumstances to possess epistemically justified beliefs across various subjects. This assessment, based on the limited perspective

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," p. 108.

of Sharon Ryan's community or even her own, is also applicable to other requirements present in DRT. In turn, it allows us to derive practical guidance from DRT in settings where its conditions are relevant.

What one might find unsatisfying is that, since PT1 alone would not provide an adequately informative theory, this is not quite a theory, and more specific perspectives should be taken into account to provide at least some specific versions of a fuller theory of wisdom based on PT1. This is, undoubtedly, desirable. However, considering that the tasks outlined in the first chapter are now fulfilled, and that the length of this dissertation has already become lengthy, it seems that we can conclude this dissertation with PT1, leaving the detailing of a more practical theory of wisdom and additional considerations regarding specific requirements for future work. In the next section, we will turn to address some more immediate concerns.

## 2. Potential Objections and Replies

Section 1 seems to suggest that PT1 is an interim outcome, requiring further specification through the introduction of specific perspectives. This characteristic might hinder direct criticisms since the theory may take on different forms when addressing particular concerns. In contrast, it is easier to scrutinize the foundation upon which this outcome was derived. This subsection will explore three potential objections to our line of thought that gave rise to PT1. These objections respectively concern the choice of realist opponents as a point of contrast for our theory's development (Subsection 2.1), the introduction of the normative dimension in the concept of wisdom to claim an advantage (Subsection 2.2), and our decision to label our approach "epistemic expressivism" (Subsection 2.3). Central to our responses to these potential challenges is our approach's process understanding of epistemic discourse as a practical process, which is the essence of PT1's metaepistemological stance and how it distinguishes itself from rival theories.

### 2.1 Undermining the Realist Comparison

This dissertation has been developed mostly on the tone of providing an alternative account that is less theoretically burdened of our epistemic discourse. Although on some issues our approach is claimed to outperform the traditional epistemic realist account, the argument is often not further pursued, as it is not the main direction that our line of thought is leading. Nevertheless, regardless of whether our original intention is merely competing with or winning over metaepistemological realism, both rely on an affirmation of the latter position in the first place. That is, we do regard the realist understanding of our epistemic linguistic practice as a worthy option or opponent. However, readers might not share this charitable and sympathetic view, especially when it comes to the realist interpretation of the Ontic Thesis's support for the Speech Act Thesis and the Alethic Thesis. For example, one may outright reject this assumption, rather than considering it unnecessary like us:

When we say that a belief is justified, epistemically justified, or even amounts to knowledge, are we issuing a normative verdict that one *should* form or sustain that belief? Not plausibly: it might be an obvious waste of time to be forming a belief on that question.<sup>1</sup>

Denying that our making epistemic judgments amounts to making normative verdict is to deny that single pieces of epistemic claims may by themselves represent corresponding normative facts. This effectively undermines the realist project, at least the version that this dissertation has paid much attention to, which presumes that each epistemic sentence is supposed to capture a state of affairs. Viewing our epistemic judgments from this perspective is not to deny that they are prompted by something in the world that we perceive, but to emphasize that they should be viewed in a different manner — they may involve communitarian factors so that they are not purely about the epistemic status itself,<sup>2</sup> or they may reflect only one part of a series of features that we associate to the epistemic status in question when all things considered.<sup>3</sup> It follows that the epistemic disagreements mentioned in previous chapters (especially in Chapter 2) are characterized in an inappropriate way, for they focus on how opposing parties have contradictory

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<sup>1</sup> Sosa, *Virtue Epistemology*, 1, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

evaluation of the same epistemic proposition, whereas the interpretation of the epistemic sentence under discussion may diverge and consequently point to different propositions that we could use to portray the epistemic status that we care about. In other words, we could have a shared intuition regarding an epistemic status, yet still have incompatible epistemic judgments over various propositions about this status, as they emphasize different aspects of the same general intuition.

The potential problem here is not that it then undermines our project, but that if the realist understanding of our epistemic discourse, characterized in our way, is not considered worth being argued against, then it seems the plausibility of our own account is also degraded. To respond to this potential worry, we need to clarify the purpose of comparing our stance to the realist one. Indeed, our stance does not rely on realism from the outset. While the comparison is enlightening, our approach essentially aims to provide a more plausible manner to understand our epistemic discourse. And once this point is clarified, it is easy to see why a critique of one version of such understandings does not directly affect ours, as the intention of this critique is actually shared. Even if the realist position is undermined, the lingering worry that we have been mainly dealing with still remains. In fact, the train of thinking in the last paragraph potentially leads to a way to unite our intuitions, so that the concern about epistemic disagreements will be dismissed, which provides certain assurance for us to rely on the intuitions that we have on epistemic issues. However, it is easy to see that this solution does not by itself escape from the potentially ultimate concern about how our epistemic intuitions can have recourse to external sources to prove its own reliability,<sup>1</sup> which leads us back to the problem of epistemic circularity. What is truly problematic, as our later exploration revealed, is not the circularity itself, to which we may have conceivable resolution to deal with.<sup>2</sup> Instead, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Namely, “[T]he calibration objection, if effective against intuitions will prove a skeptical quicksand that engulfs all knowledge, not just the intuitive. No source will then survive, since none can be calibrated without eventual self-dependence. That is so at least for sources broadly enough conceived: as, say, memory, introspection, and perception. None of these can be defended epistemically as reliable enough unless allowed to yield some of the data to be used in its own defense.” (ibid., p. 64.) This problem can lead to an issue about epistemic circularity. For Sosa’s subsequent solution, see Sosa, *Reflective Knowledge*, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Sosa proposes a “divide and conquer” strategy: “one could lean one’s own intuitions evidentially on those of others. Or one could distinguish to similar effect between one’s intuitions at a given time and those at another time.” (*Virtue Epistemology*, 1, p. 64.)

whether we can ultimately be assured that matters. Our proposal, if it holds water, remains an effective way out in this respect.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2 Undermining the Normative Domain

Another key notion underpinning our theory is the normative dimension of epistemology, through which we posited that various theories of wisdom can be harmonized. We did mention in passing that it is possible to conceive epistemology without involving normative elements. However, it then became apparent that some of the plausibility of our theory, specifically its advantages on reconciling clashing views of wisdom, are closely tied to the normative reading of epistemic notions, which presumes the existence of their normative aspect. In simpler terms, we are discussing the epistemic normativity central to concept grasping. A concept, when it is appropriately comprehended, exerts a certain force that disposes us to act accordingly given fitting circumstances. For instance, one would naturally deem people “wise” if they fulfill the criteria set by the concept of wisdom. Moreover, if this concept also holds a normative force, we will experience an added sense of obligation, prompting us to feel discomfort or unease when our action diverges from its guideline. For example, we tend to feel uncomfortable when one meets the concept’s requirements, yet we refuse to acknowledge her wisdom. What is more, we regard this reaction as resulting from a genuine deviation from what we “ought to” do. This differs significantly from trivial discomforts, such as the fleeting unease when we refuse to call some fruits by their received names. Within the realist framework, the weight of such seriousness is straightforward to understand since it is intuitive for us to follow corresponding facts when they are available. Nevertheless, even in our irrealist picture, this normative force still seems to play an important role in our argument for PT1. Its value arises from offering a preferable solution that facilitates us to interpret the concept of wisdom in a unified manner. Thus, if it is conceivable that wisdom, as an epistemic

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<sup>1</sup> However, recall that our line of thought could also be understood under the banner of quietism. Similar to Sosa’s observation of epistemological naturalism, when a position is “defined as a kind of cognitive quietism that scorns activist attempts to justify our ordinary beliefs philosophically,” it is compatible “with the theoretical activism of an epistemology aimed at explaining what gives our beliefs the cognitive status required to constitute knowledge.” (*Reflective Knowledge*, 2, p. 57.)

notion, might not involve this normative aspect from the very beginning, the relevant advantages claimed by our line of thought might then lack a legitimate foundation.

The core of this issue is not whether there is still any feeling of being demanded to recognize someone who acts wisely — there certainly is, as even in the case of naming the fruits, a certain pressure exists, no matter if its source is distinctively normative or can be reduced to something else like part of our psychological mechanisms. The crux of the matter is whether the introduction of the normative sphere can justifiably be considered advantageous. That is to say, one may question whether the introduction of the normative dimension is indeed something valuable rather than a useless addition. One may wonder: why can't various theories of wisdom stay as they are, and reject being uniformly assessed? What is the point in viewing them in the same light? Even if there is a standpoint from which we can consider them together, why would this standpoint be attached with any additional value except for its simply being there? The concerns behind these questions can be better explored by examining the evolutionary account of normativity. In this kind of understanding, normative stories are characterized by requiring “only claims about natural selection pressures having favored the development of such a capacity and tendency because of the positive effects such traits had on biological fitness.”<sup>1</sup> Such an interpretation often leads to so-called evolutionary debunking arguments.

The influence of natural facts on the development of human normativity is nothing novel that needs to be demonstrated anew in this dissertation. What is important to highlight is the use of the term “only” in this context — a word that is often contentious in philosophical writings. Specifically, Sharon Street's reading of this “only” stresses that our evaluative judgments are systematically “saturated,” viz., tremendously influenced by evolutionary or selective pressures. In essence, we are naturally inclined to affirm evaluative claims that are in favor of reproductive success.<sup>2</sup> Once we realize the impact of

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<sup>1</sup> William FitzPatrick, "Morality and Evolutionary Biology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2021 Edition, 2021). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/morality-biology/>. Note that the original text only talks about morality. I am here borrowing and adapting it to cover both epistemological and ethical stories for reasons that we have discussed. A similar adaptation will be applied to other passages quoted in this subsection.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical studies* (2006): p. 121.

this natural force, we can hardly deny that our evaluative judgements are largely shaped by the selective pressures. To put it somewhat differently, this makes it difficult to insist firmly that we make evaluative claims fundamentally on our own will. A force beyond our autonomous control significantly influences our decisions to endorse specific evaluative content over others. Although we make evaluative judgments, they are, to a great extent, not initially made by us intentionally. This idea becomes clearer when considering that such influenced evaluative behaviors do not satisfy Anscombe's criterion that agents should be able to answer the "Why?" question concerning their intentional actions — it appears that the underlying evolutionary force that leads to the final judgment cannot be revealed simply by a series of questions of "Why?" imposed upon the subject.<sup>1</sup>

The direct target of Street's original argument is what she understands as value realism — including non-naturalist value realism and some particular realist stances under the banner of value naturalism — that maintains that "there are evaluative truths which hold independently of the whole set of evaluative judgements we make or might make upon reflection, or independently of the whole set of other evaluative attitudes we hold or might hold upon reflection."<sup>2</sup> Street begins with a Darwinian interpretation of evaluative activity, resulting in a dilemma that realists must face. This dilemma can be roughly understood as follows: One horn of the dilemma lies in the natural inclination for our judgments to conform to available corresponding facts or truths (as we have argued). Given that realists assert the existence of independent evaluative facts or truths, our evaluative judgments should only be deemed correct when they match those facts or truths. Nevertheless, mere alignment is insufficient for knowledge, as it conspicuously lacks one of the most pivotal elements of the concept of knowledge: justification. It is challenging to discern any justification that could relate an independent set of facts or truths to our unintentional evaluative behaviors. The inherent passivity here suggests no intentional alignment to an independently objective standard, and it seems implausible to justify an action's or behavior's outcome when there is no intent targeting that outcome. Even if our evaluative

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<sup>1</sup> This would cause a problem for positions that hold that epistemic justification does not necessitate the belief possessor's internal accessibility as well, for when the external factor (the process of natural selection) is reflected on, it is unclear why it is absolutely worth preserving.

<sup>2</sup> Street, "Darwinian Dilemma," p. 111.



beliefs match certain truths, this is most likely just a match by chance. Consequently, the realists' insistence on the independence of evaluative facts or truths results in a lack of appropriate justification for our evaluative beliefs to evolve into knowledge. This then invites undesirable skepticism.

The other horn of the dilemma surfaces when realists choose to assert a connection between evaluative truths and our evaluative experience shaped by natural selection. Considering realists' emphasis on the former's independence, there seems to be only one option for realism to make the reconciliation. Namely, claiming that evolutionary "causes actually in some way *tracked* the alleged independent truths."<sup>1</sup> This, in effect, posits a scientific hypothesis requiring much effort to clarify how the tracking system works. However, it is evident that an alternative hypothesis could be proposed without such a hefty assumption.<sup>2</sup> To simplify it in our words, the extra amount of effort required to explain how our evaluative behaviors unintentionally track a set of independent truths makes it an inherently more demanding hypothesis about our evaluative experience, rendering it less appealing than rival theories that do not rely upon this kind of relation.

In Street's view, this dilemma poses a serious challenge for genuine realism and makes it seem less tenable compared to anti-realism. The latter considers evaluative truths emerge from, rather than precede, evaluative attitudes shaped by natural selection, and therefore sidesteps the issue by encompassing the evolutionary influences more plausibly in their account. A point of contention is Street's claim that even our rational reflection on primitive evaluative judgments cannot count as an alignment with corresponding facts or truths in the realist sense. This is because these reflections must be rooted in some given evaluative judgments or standpoints, which are as distorted or contaminated as the ones that they aim to reevaluate.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, even a naturalist theory attempting to identify evaluative facts with natural facts would not aid realism, for the former also stems

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 126. I have omitted Street's detailed explanation of the shortcomings of the realists' "tracking account" due to space constraints. Put crudely, this account is seen as less preferable because it lacks parsimony and clarity, and it does not effectively illuminate the reasons behind our making certain evaluative judgments rather than others.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

from reconsideration on evaluative judgments already influenced by selective pressures.<sup>1</sup> In response, one might object by suggesting that there is still room for realists to counter that this “contamination” does not rule out the possibility of discerning independent evaluative facts or truths. That said, such a debate is not where our primary concern lies. What warrants more attention is that the crux of Street’s critique against realism is not the Darwinian dilemma in isolation, but how realism treats the concept of “evaluative truths.”

At its heart, realism goes beyond just positing that there are independent evaluative truths; they also assume that these truths have a significant role to play in shaping our evaluative judgments. Throughout this dissertation, such truths are depicted as normative facts, which, when available, our normative judgments ought to mirror. For example, if an epistemic fact is present and outlines the definition of wisdom, then those who fit this description should be judged as wise. The realist narrative ascribes a role to normative facts that cannot be conflated with or supplanted by the role of natural selection. However, when contrasting a realist account based on independent evaluative standards with a scientific account based on selective pressures, the latter emerges as evidently more compelling. Thus, realists are witnessed to try to maintain the significance of their story when the scientific explanation is already in play, even though they may end up encountering the aforementioned dilemma. From this angle, an underlying question emerges: If a scientific interpretation of our evaluative activities is implicitly prioritized, what then justifies the introduction of a non-naturalist (or, to put it neutrally, an alternative to the standard naturalist) explanation for the same occurrences? As Joyce observes:

Were it not for a certain social ancestry affecting our biology [...] we wouldn’t have concepts like *obligation*, *virtue*, *property*, *desert*, and *fairness* at all. [...] [I]t would appear that once we become aware of this genealogy of morals we should [...] cultivate agnosticism regarding all positive beliefs involving these concepts until we find some solid evidence either for or against them.<sup>2</sup>

What this subsection intends to address is not the debate over the necessity of a non-naturalist account for normativity, which is often discussed elsewhere but exceeds the scope of this dissertation. The focal point is the potential threat posed by this preliminary

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 181.

agnosticist stance to the reason why we attributed a benefit to our way of theorization. That is, this dissertation posited an advantage for our theory over empirical accounts due to its ability to harmonize diverse theories through the introduction of a normative requirement (and, in comparison to other philosophical accounts, through a clearer introduction). Yet, as indicated at the beginning of this subsection, our work has not made it clear if we can affirmatively answer the question regarding the availability or necessity of a non-standard naturalist account of normativity. This implies that our perspective permits the possibility that epistemological tasks may be approached non-normatively. If so, the so-claimed normative advantage seems to dissolve. Put differently, normative truths may become redundant, no matter in what form they are conceived. One may then wonder if maintaining an apparently independent normative domain is entirely unnecessary, for there is no more strictly speaking *sui generis* normative guidance for evaluative activities. From this lens, the issue extends beyond merely challenging realism to all theories that attempt to ascribe special value to the normative account of what is already clear in a natural understanding without sufficiently vindicating the former's autonomy.

We can address this challenge on two levels. On the first level, recall that when we highlighted the relative advantage over empirical theories regarding the normative aspect of the concept of wisdom, our underdeveloped proposal was not the only one to gain; it was just one among a group of philosophical accounts that benefit from this merit. If the challenge stands, it targets not just our proposal, but any theory that posits a normative sphere. While this point might seem repetitive, emphasizing that this challenge spans beyond our proposal to a broader theoretical framework is essential. It implies that the critique needs to examine not only the resilience of our line of thought, but also how the wider set of theories might respond to it. As our discussion has shown, there is a practically justifying reason to take the inherited mainstream epistemological theories seriously. Although traditional theories' tacit commitment to realism, which relies on the assumption of accessible epistemic facts, was treated with skepticism, our approach still aims to retain their intuitively appealing elements. The result is a kind of middle ground: we neither assert an entirely objective normative domain like realists, nor dismiss it outright. This is not just a strategy to avoid the risk of losing what remains attractive in the notion of normativity, but a sensible move considering our actual practice. Simply asserting the potential

nonexistence of the normative realm is similar to claiming that life might lack meaning: while both might be rationally tenable hypotheses, they demand substantial justification to become compelling stories. In fact, if we were to give up doing what we do in reality — ascribing value to our life — based solely on a speculative concern, it would likely be viewed as more irrational than rational. Since taking the normative aspect of epistemic concepts for granted is still a popular and acceptable inclination, we have opted for a more cautious approach, suggesting only that we do not necessarily need purely objective normative truths to interpret our normative linguistic practices, while, in a sense, a normative dimension still exists. Our challengers, by contrast, seem to dismiss the concept of normative truths entirely, including its intuitive appeals. However, this extreme rejection needs a much more comprehensive discussion to be sufficiently persuasive, a task that the current offerings from the advocates for this challenge do not seem to have accomplished. Given that our primary focus is on developing a plausible theory of wisdom, and the plausibility of setting a normative domain has not been dismissed, it is reasonable to set aside or relegate this potential issue for now.

That said, on the second level, there is no obvious obstacle preventing us from delving into the deeper issues the challenge presents. The challenge appears to imply that if the normative dimension is revealed to not exist in a substantial sense, then its associated advantages might be nullified. Nevertheless, this is not the only possibility. If our talk of the normative dimension of the concept of wisdom can be thoroughly translated into natural scientific language, then the perceived advantages can likewise be interpreted in the new context. For instance, we could interpret the noted advantage in normative harmonization as a scientific hypothesis concerning an indispensable idea when conceptualizing wisdom that is universally — or at least widely — accepted by different linguistic communities. In this case, the proposal put forth in this dissertation remains a rational reevaluation of the current epistemic discourse. It resembles an initial philosophical conclusion, which is open to further empirical scrutiny, such as a psychological survey assessing how it represents the popular conceptions of wisdom. Although the advantage might seem somewhat diminished in this context, it retains its significance, especially considering the light it sheds on a direction of inquiry.

What is important to note in the shift from the first level to the second level is the reason why the two points above can be considered as responses on two levels rather than two distinct treatments (one general and one particular). In essence, a shift like this requires a mechanism for transitioning from a surface level to a deeper one. Our line of thought serves this purpose. On the one hand, it presents a first-order theory in line with other mainstream wisdom theories in terms of being grounded in our epistemic discourse. On the other hand, it takes into account the implicit connection between first-order theories and their second-order commitments. With this dual focus, our approach allows theories to exhibit surface-level similarities yet diverge when addressing specific challenges. This duality enables our proposal to respond to the eliminative challenge from both the perspective of broad normative theories and its unique viewpoint. But this is not all that merits our attention.

Recall that in Street's argument, genuine realism that emphasizes the independence of moral truths faces serious difficulty in accommodating the latter's naturalizability. By adopting an antirealist stance that abandons this insistence, the challenge of accommodating selective pressures becomes much less threatening. Our irrealist position resonates with this maneuver, as it directs us to theorize from real-world epistemic linguistic practice, allowing us to adaptively choose theoretical frameworks that embrace newly uncovered facts. One might then argue that our irrealist approach thereby has an edge over its realist counterpart when tackling evolutionary debunking in epistemology. While this seems plausible, what is more intriguing lies in the shift of perspectives from which we scrutinize the issue. Our emphasis on the on-going practice suggests that our starting point is not anchored in the tenets of a realist perspective, which seeks to uphold the autonomy of normative truths; nor does it automatically lead to extreme antirealism, which aims to negate the very concept of normative force. Our interpretation of the normative aspect of "wisdom" derives from our understanding of epistemic discourse as a dynamic process, drawing on which we refine our grasp of the term "wisdom." We examine the current offerings of our epistemic discourse, which include both traditional theories and newly introduced breakthroughs, as they are the best that can be found at this point of the process, and then we synthesize these insights to form a plausible narrative. Yet, the ever-evolving nature of both the process and its offerings implies that they are

susceptible to updates or even replacements. It is in this light we maintain referencing our relative advantage over empirical theories as an advantage within the “normative domain” — an aspect of the concept of wisdom that is currently widely held as pivotal, and is expected to be represented by any theory of wisdom that is adequate. The sustainability of this “normative domain” and its alignment with popular conceptions of wisdom is not thus guaranteed. Nonetheless, any future revelations that challenge our present conclusion should not be deemed catastrophic. They simply offer fresh information that will shape our future epistemic linguistic practice, much like the introduction of evolutionary selection once did. Embracing these updates does not jeopardize the practice itself. And it is this adaptability, which our process understanding of epistemic discourse equips us with, that essentially helps us better integrate the naturalized account of evaluative activities. In other words, the crux of our response to the challenge of undermining the normative domain lies less in contrasting our theory with realism-based competitors and more in refocusing on the very practice that we try to elucidate.

### 2.3 The Globalization of Expressivism and Inferentialism

Clarifying the two issues above suggests that the epistemic expressivist line of thought behind our proposed theory is not merely confined to a preferable metaepistemological stance, but can evolve into a more independent and ambitious position. As Huw Price observes:

the expressivist’s positive alternative to the matching model doesn’t depend on the claim that the matching model is *ever* a useful model of the relation between natural language and the natural world.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, although expressivism might initially be suggested as an alternative approach to a realist project of matching human language with the world to address (or avoid) certain concerns (as in our case), its plausibility does not essentially hinge on its ability to substitute or even replace the more traditional position. It has already been

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<sup>1</sup> Huw Price, "Two expressivist programmes, two bifurcations," in *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 30.

mentioned that our treatment of the three realist theses might extend beyond our discussion of epistemic discourse, which are, by default, seen as committing to metaepistemological realism. However, this potential expansion has mostly been perceived as extending the existing curiosity about epistemic assertions to encompass other linguistic practices that, like epistemic assertions, are typically assumed to represent corresponding facts. Additionally, they may share similar solutions such as retrospective treatment in subsequent communications. What is crucial to note here is that another interpretation of this potential development exists. In this interpretation, the significance does not lie in the possible extension of epistemic expressivist responses to realism's issues to other fields. Instead, it is the novel insight into a series of human linguistic phenomena that expressivism offers that truly matters.

It is easy to understand the first interpretation. In Price's words, expressivists' strategies (specifically Blackburn's quasi-realist) read moral declarative claims without adhering to certain commitments that are taken for granted in other sentences of similar structure. They pose the question, "what is it that all declarative claims have in common (quasi and really descriptive claims alike, if such a bifurcation there be)?"<sup>1</sup> while rejecting Representationalism (with an emphasized "R") which assumes that our statements should mirror states of affairs in the world.<sup>2</sup> This strategy is vital for addressing the challenge of matching commonsensical truths with the world (namely, the placement problems) while retaining a sensible naturalist stance by avoiding the unattainable objective of validating the truth of all acceptable claims with an insufficient or mismatched set of scientific truth-makers.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the extension of the expressivist thinking can be comprehended as this approach being possibly drawn upon or applied in any field bothered by similar worries.

What is more difficult to see is the importance of the expressivist insights *per se*, regardless of their utility in tackling the aforementioned problems. Price's thoughts on this matter are intricately complicated and cannot be fully detailed here. Broadly speaking, he points out that traditional expressivism presupposes a clear demarcation between

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

descriptive and non-descriptive language,<sup>1</sup> whereas this distinction is not quite prominent in real life. As a result, we should reject it in favor of a unified understanding that encompasses judgments and assertions alike, and thereby develop a comprehensive theory of assertoric linguistic practices.<sup>2</sup> Then, what could serve as the shared background? According to Price:

At its simplest, my proposal is that the assertoric language game is simply a coordination device for social creatures, whose welfare depends on collaborative action.<sup>3</sup>

By introducing this shared picture for uniformly considering these linguistic phenomena, Price effectively globalizes the application of expressivism. It is worth noting the pivotal role that human collaboration through social connection plays in this picture. Through this overarching conception, assertions across diverse domains can be seen as specialized manifestations of this general idea in particular circumstances, with certain adaptations in accordance with the specific rules for the given domain's parochial language game. Viewing issues from this aspect, PT1's introduction of the meta-theoretical requirement of idealization from a first-personal perspective appears to align with Price's framework. In this context, it could be understood as providing a characterization of a domain-specific adaptation of our assertoric language game centered on wisdom. In this new light, one might further reflect on, say, how this language game about wisdom differs from those that revolve around other essential epistemic notions. Notably, compared to more frequently encountered language games like those about knowledge, the primacy given to an understanding of the world from a natural scientific viewpoint seems significantly diminished in the discussion of wisdom — Consider, for example, two conceptions of wisdom that have equal evidential support; arguably, neither would overshadow the other based solely on greater public accessibility or objective evaluability.

While this seems to be an intriguing direction to develop both further comparison between wisdom and other epistemic concepts and relevant future exploration, limiting our

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<sup>1</sup> Namely, the bifurcation thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Price, "Two expressivist programmes," pp. 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> "Pluralism, 'world' and the primacy of science," p. 49.



discussion to the current scope of this dissertation is sufficient for our main purpose. That is, developing a more plausible theory or method of theorizing wisdom. Yet, before we set aside these fascinating considerations to future works (whether on wisdom or on a broader treatment of human expressions), there is a concern regarding the term chosen for our metaepistemological position that needs to be addressed immediately. Our use of the label “epistemic expressivism” in previous discussion was, to some extent, understandably arbitrary. The choice is reasonable, given its alignment with a major thread in the expressivist treatment of normative claims: introducing an alternative explanation for our normative linguistic practices that does not rely on the contentious presumption of normative facts. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the term “expressivism” might evoke questions about how “expressive” our position assumes normative language to be. Specifically, when we suggested a shift in understanding the meaning of normative claims towards *post hoc* rationalizations, the expressive aspect — such as conveying certain mental states — seems relegated as it is less directly concerned. This becomes especially evident when we take into account the potential evolution of our theory towards Price’s project that centers around socially situated language game, which clearly goes beyond and encompasses more than mere personal expression.

As mentioned when we first brought up the term “epistemic expressivism,” this label was merely a tentative designation for the outlined position. Therefore, whether “expressivism” is indeed the most appropriate label is largely a terminological issue, one that does not substantially affect our conclusions. That is to say, our line of thought does not have an inherent insistence in naming; if a more fitting term emerges, it would be readily embraced. However, there might be a deeper, more compelling reason to reconsider our theoretical direction as a whole. Apart from debates over how appropriate the term is, “expressivism” might be seen as outright inappropriate. This becomes clear when considering Chrisman’s critique of mainstream expressivists’ understanding of “normative concepts”:

There is a strong tradition in cognitive science of viewing concepts, especially those often deployed in observation as asymmetrically dependent labels or classificatory devices. [...] Another tradition dominates the philosophy of logic, where concepts are seen as logically articulable functions or nodes of inferential (evidential and/or justificatory) relations. [...] I think both conceptions capture something that is

important about at least some concepts, so I'd say neither is correct if it is meant to capture all that there is to concepts and concept possession. However, when it comes to the nature of *human* concepts and especially our normative concepts, I think the inferentialist conception has some claim to being more illuminating and fundamental. [...] [And] I suspect that expressivists are, to put things somewhat crudely, tacitly conceiving of normative concepts as classificatory devices rather than as nodes of inferential relations.<sup>1</sup>

What Chrisman emphasizes here is that our conception of “concepts,” specifically “normative concepts,” typically views them as tools for both discrimination and as nexus of reasoning. To Chrisman, the latter role is more essential for normative concepts due to their uniquely human nature. By contrast, most expressivists tend to focus on the former, establishing a stable connection between speakers’ mental states and their normative claims. Contrary to the traditional notion that normative claims should be understood in virtue of their truth-conditions, like epistemic facts, expressivists perceive normative concepts as devices that categorize normative properties in relation to the subject. As discussed in Subsection 2.2 of Chapter 3, this expressivist approach enjoys certain theoretical merits and can even potentially address challenges like the Frege-Geach problem by linking mental states to epistemic sentences, thereby stabilizing the latter’s meaning. Nonetheless, it falls short in addressing the broader challenge of accounting for “the logic of human concepts,” “since it doesn’t explain the inferential (evidential or justificatory) relations in which normative concepts stand.”<sup>2</sup> In simpler terms, expressivism overlooks the inferential aspect of normative concepts that Chrisman deems most fundamental. As an alternative, Chrisman proposes normative inferentialism. This stance posits that “normative predicates and the sentences in which they figure mean what they do in virtue of their inferential role.” Not only does this stance provide motivations for actions and solutions to the queerness/placement problems as expressivism does, but it surpasses expressivism by offering reasons that could be employed to justify the actions in question.<sup>3</sup> Most crucially,

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<sup>1</sup> Chrisman, "Epistemic Expressivism to Epistemic Inferentialism," pp. 120-21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124-25. A further subtle ethical and epistemic distinction under the banner of normative inferentialism is omitted here due to the space constraints. It is also worth noting that the inferentialist connection between desire-like attitudes and expected actions does not depend on a theory of meaning, unlike expressivism.

its being based on the inferential conception helps it avoid the concern of impoverished normative concepts, an issue prevalent in expressivism.<sup>1</sup>

Chrisman's critique of expressivism may not be as stringent as he presumes. After all, he acknowledges the significance of both conceptions of normative concepts. While Chrisman argues that expressivists adopt only one of them, this does not necessarily imply that the chosen one cannot be complemented, instead of being wholly replaced by the other. Moreover, it appears that the conception expressivists actually adopt has been narrowed in Chrisman's portrayal of the distinct classificatory understanding. His primary contention is that expressivism underemphasizes the unique inferential role of normative concepts, which manifests itself in three aspects: First, normative concepts serve as inferential nodes that connect inferential relations, including but not limited to common logical and conceptual ties; second, in addition to their theoretical inferential role shared with descriptive concepts, normative concepts can also translate normative beliefs into first-person intentions with practical implications; and third, normative concepts are connected to the world in a unique direction of fit, contrasting the one seen in beliefs.<sup>2</sup> However, both in our prior discussions and in Chrisman's own depiction of the expressivist approach, expressivism does, to some degree, recognize these inferential connections and practical implications, as well as the mind-to-world direction of fit. Thus, to say that expressivists maintain a "single-minded focus [...] on the expressive role of epistemic claims"<sup>3</sup> without any regard for the inferential nature of normative concepts seems to be an overstatement, even if their emphasis does not satisfy Chrisman's expectations. Furthermore, simply shifting our focus to Chrisman's preferred view of normative concepts as inferential nodes might lead to an extremization at the other end. This could neglect the equally significant understanding of these concepts as classificatory devices. Such an oversight might raise questions like whether a sufficient account of the origins of these inferential nodes can be provided.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

While these reasons seem to suggest that we should reject Chrisman's criticism, my primary intention is to stress that there is no need to formulate the underlying concern here as a stark contrast between two conceptions that could potentially serve as a foundation for theorization. On the one hand, even if we set aside the observation that Chrisman's distinction between these two conceptions is not strictly followed in actual theories, it remains conceivable that starting from only one of these two conceptions can lead to a comprehensive account addressing both facets. On the other hand, the distinction in itself does not appear to be the main thrust of Chrisman's argument. He seems to be more interested in pointing out something more profound — that is, how to highlight the intriguing role of normative concepts in human activity and their contribution to a range of unique human phenomena. Or as he articulates, "some essentially nondescriptive social-practical role."<sup>1</sup> As long as this social-linguistic aspect is appropriately taken into account,<sup>2</sup> a theory will effectively address Chrisman's core concern. And recall that the pathway that we are exploring and its potential overlap with Price's project, is, in fact, in line with this consideration. Therefore, whether future research in this direction would ultimately yield a result that aligns with Chrisman's anticipation or not, neither our preliminary use of the label "expressivism" nor our actual line of thought seems inherently incompatible with his "inferentialist" proposal and should thus be given up. Even if a change in terminology becomes necessary as our theory evolves, its essence remains intact.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Concluding Remarks

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> For example, taking the multiplicity of social functions and the expected objectivity for the use of epistemic concepts seriously (ibid., pp. 127-28.).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that while our approach need not be discarded due to potential critiques of its inattention to the inferential role of normative concepts, this does not mean that epistemic expressivism must evolve into epistemic inferentialism, particularly the version that Chrisman has in mind. Specifically, in his characterization, inferentialism is somehow able to guarantee the objectivity of epistemic discourse. This stance seems to be at odds with our line of thought, or at least demands significant effort for reconciliation.

In this chapter, we finally arrived at a culmination of a series of inquiry of our previous discussion of this dissertation by proposing a process theory of wisdom in Section 1:

**(PT1):** Subject  $S_1$  judges Subject  $S_2$  as wise, if and only if  $S_2$  has achieved the ultimate epistemic goal of and through an epistemic process that  $S_1$  considers to be ideal. Subjects  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  can be the same person or different individuals.

Our proposal derives from a process understanding of epistemic discourse, which draws on our epistemic linguistic practice's utility to justify our discourse's offering. In light of a refined understanding of veritism, specifically its argument from virtuous inquiry, as one of our epistemic discourse's offerings, we developed a theory of wisdom in terms of wisdom's unique position as what virtuous inquirers ultimately aim at. By clarifying this conception of wisdom as the ultimate goal of ideal epistemic process from a first-personal perspective, we managed to introduce a meta-theoretical normative requirement of idealization that is able to, on the one hand, interrelate plausible, yet potentially contradictory expectations for wisdom with a pluralist treatment accommodating various perspectives; and, on the one hand, be complemented by a specific perspective to form a wisdom theory that provides helpful guidance in practice. This approach to theorization effectively addresses the considerations raised and satisfies the criteria for plausibility set in the first chapter: First, our process theory of wisdom can align with the basic framework for theorizing wisdom, along with other plausible conditions or conceptions of wisdom pondered upon throughout this dissertation, in the sense that the latter can be incorporated into our proposal as further requirements developed from particular perspectives that helps specify our general meta-theory of wisdom. Second, with the help of the requirement of idealization, our proposal successfully brings in the normative dimension to solve the problem concerning the gaps between different perspectives' assessment of wisdom by providing a gauge of comparing various conception of wisdom. Third, our proposal can also address the issue of presupposing epistemic objects in light of its adjustment of focus from what is desired in an epistemic process to the initiating epistemic desire itself. The second and the third points are related to our proposal's setting of a first-personal perspective, this enables our proposal to make clearer the source where the normative force

of our theory derives from, and potentially exhibits a way to highlight the favorable epistemic agency when conceptualizing wisdom. Lastly, our proposal can also address the concern of the practical aspect of wisdom by introducing the notion of practical knowledge to illuminate the practical aspect of wise individual while avoiding existing counterexamples. In summary, by drawing on lessons learned throughout this dissertation, a process theory was proposed and qualified as a plausible option for theorizing wisdom as it meets the criteria for plausibility set in the first chapter, and even outperforms its competing theories in certain respects.

In Section 2, some potential objections were presented to further examine what this dissertation has offered. These objections relate to the reliability of the manner in which we developed our line of thought, respectively targeting the competing theories with which we contrast (epistemic realism), the common presumption upon which we claimed an advantage (the normative domain), and the plausibility of our approach itself (labeled as “epistemic expressivism”). One noteworthy point is that these objections primarily target the foundation for suggesting PT1, instead of PT1 itself. This is understandable for two reasons: For one, PT1’s inherent need for additional perspectival specification makes it difficult to criticize it directly, whether this nature is interpreted as vagueness or underdevelopment. For another, and more importantly, what essentially distinguishes our proposal from the prevailing theories of wisdom is its underlying metaepistemological stance. Although this stance is not immediately apparent in the final formulation of PT1, establishing this groundwork constituted a significant portion of this dissertation and raised the most crucial point that this dissertation aims to convey. In responding to these potential challenges, it becomes clear that our argument does not hinge on the soundness of its rival realism-based theories or prevalent assumption about the normative aspect of the wisdom concept. Rather, the crux of our theory is its emphasis on our epistemic linguistic practice. By drawing on our process understanding of this practice, we can effectively address these concerns, and bolster our confidence in specifying the requirements of wisdom in different contexts in future PT1-based research.

## Conclusion

Various reasons can be given to raise interest in wisdom, a primary one being its recognition as a respectable achievement worth pursuing. We are naturally inclined to pursue what is worth pursuing, and gaining a better grasp of wisdom is essential for effective guidance in its pursuit. Thus, it becomes important to understand precisely what “wisdom” means. Our dissertation begins by following this intuitive appeal, seeking to provide a beneficial philosophical, especially epistemological, account of wisdom.

The first chapter presents common expectations of wisdom, particularly those identified in empirical and philosophical research. These expectations emerge from diverse perspectives: experts and laypeople, first- and third-person viewpoints, theoretical and practical considerations, and both general and field-specific insights. In examining mainstream discussions, we deem certain requirements for wisdom plausible and categorize them within a framework modeled after three phases of the general epistemic process: (1) starting with the possession and exertion of epistemic characteristics such as epistemic accuracy, humility, and prudence; (2) aiming at an epistemic target object, either in general or within specific domains, which requires at least justified beliefs; and (3) culminating in an appreciation of the value of the subject field of wisdom, obedience to inference results aligned with this appreciation, and a disposition to apply the accepted decisions in practice. This framework outlines a basic, intuitive interpretation of wisdom, which any comprehensive account should address. However, the accompanying examination does not yield an unshakable or uncontroversial description of wisdom. Instead, it highlights the perplexing phenomenon of diverse, reasonable conceptions of wisdom, some of which may conflict with others. This is particularly evident when considering the coexistence of radically contrasting cases, such as wisdom that emphasizes the significance of daily experience versus that which denies it. An underlying concern is thus raised regarding the method for obtaining the sought-after answer: Initially, our task seems to be identifying and clarifying the concept of wisdom, and thereby provide a unified interpretation across various perspectives and contexts. This exploration, however, appears to reveal equally plausible, yet conflicting, options that resist harmonization and unification.

The critical transition here involves an additional consideration beyond the common approach to wisdom research, which primarily revolves around the definition of wisdom. Specifically, it leads to a deeper contemplation of the nature of the answer that we seek: Addressing the question of what should be considered as wisdom suggests the necessity of a normative generic concept of wisdom. This concept would exert normative force, compelling people to recognize certain characteristics as essential to wisdom. However, the underlying concern indicates that not every wisdom concept can fulfill this role if all plausible intuitions about wisdom are taken seriously. Since determining the nature of the response conceptually precedes the response itself, it seems pivotal to grapple with this preliminary issue before revisiting the initial search for a plausible wisdom concept. Given that this concern especially pertains to how we “ought to” understand wisdom and achievements in this area, it underscores the epistemic normativity of the wisdom concept. This, in turn, prompts an epistemological discussion, traditionally associated with the study of knowledge and understanding. The justification for viewing the issue of wisdom through an epistemological lens is further strengthened by the consideration that at least two components of the basic framework for interpreting wisdom are closely linked to one’s epistemic state.

This background sets the stage for a two-step approach in the dissertation’s subsequent task: first, an epistemological exploration into the deeper nature of the normative generic concept of wisdom, and second, a more concrete account of wisdom, informed by both the findings from the previous exploration and the theoretical framework established. To aid the ensuing discussion, it is proposed to concentrate on an exemplary question about wisdom, the answer to which can be analogized and applied to other aspects of wisdom: specifically, whether the concept of wisdom, and accordingly an appropriate account or theory reflecting it, should include a truth condition in its requirements for epistemic status. This inquiry particularly concerns whether beliefs contributing to an individual’s wisdom should necessarily be true. The question about truth condition is not only intuitively central to an epistemological study of wisdom, but also closely tied to the longstanding tradition in epistemology that prioritizes truth. This turns out to be a key issue leading to the proposed theory of wisdom that emerges in the final chapters of the dissertation.



The set objectives are first approached through an investigation into whether adopting an unconventional relativistic concept could effectively resolve the issues surrounding wisdom's epistemic normativity. The advantage of relativism lies in its ability to reconcile the potential conflicts among various reasonable wisdom concepts. It achieves this by considering each concept as true in relation to certain parameters, standards, or frameworks. Since none is deemed absolutely true, these concepts coexist without conflict, each accommodated within its own context without overlap. While a radical or universal application of relativism is quickly dismissed due to self-refutation, a more limited application warrants consideration. In our case, this leads to a localized epistemic relativism, which could be applied to understanding wisdom. Epistemic relativists typically argue that incompatible knowledge assertions can be made and deemed correct against their respective evaluative standards, and there is no further standard to judge these criteria. Applying this to the exemplary truth condition question illustrates a specific instance of what a relativistic interpretation of wisdom might entail: The contradictory statements "wisdom necessitates true beliefs" and "wisdom does not necessitate true beliefs" can both be upheld without a definitive standard to determine which is truer or ultimately the sole truth. As such, epistemic relativism allows us to consider both claims as true relative to disparate standards, avoiding the need to discard either.

Two prevalent approaches to establishing epistemic relativism are examined: the traditional approach, which focuses on how epistemic relativism helps resolve the practically undesirable phenomenon of epistemic disagreements, and the non-traditional approach, which emphasizes epistemic relativism's superior explanatory power in understanding our epistemic linguistic practice. Representative arguments for each approach are carefully scrutinized to assess their plausibility.

The traditional arguments typically follow this reasoning: (1) Absolute assurance in justifying any epistemic judgment is unattainable due to issues like question-begging, infinite regress, and arbitrary justification. (2) This results in undesirable epistemic phenomena, like irresolvable epistemic disagreements. (3) These issues necessitate adopting epistemic relativism as a solution. Essentially, these arguments posit epistemic relativism as either the sole or most effective strategy to tackle practical concerns. While this does not positively establish epistemic relativism as the correct position, the arguments

may counter this concern by suggesting the inherent defect of epistemic circularity-incommensurability in all attempts to formulate a pure epistemological theory. This fundamental problem inevitably leads to deep-level epistemic disagreements and necessitates a non-theoretical solution for affected epistemic activities. From this perspective, epistemic relativism serves as a practical solution by sensibly allowing beliefs to be justified in a relative manner, thereby preserving the possibility of establishing knowledge that we take for granted. Its advantage lies in aligning with and theoretically supporting our epistemic linguistic practice. In contrast, skepticism, which also builds on the lack of ultimate assurance in affirming any epistemic claim, concludes that no epistemic judgment can or should be made. This position contradicts our actual conduct and is not taken into account in everyday life. Although skepticism and epistemic relativism may share a common starting point, they diverge in their conclusions and practical significance.

While this line of thought develops from examining traditional arguments for epistemic relativism, the gist is more general. The discussion evolves from trying to directly demonstrate epistemic relativism, such as showing that it accurately reflects metaphysically grounded epistemic facts, to proving its plausibility by highlighting its advantages in facilitating epistemic practice. Accompanying this shift is a transition from the traditional approach to the new approach that stresses epistemic relativism's preferability in explaining our epistemic discourse. The new arguments for epistemic relativism are typically marked by a vindicative strategy, offering the best semantic or pragmatic explanations for epistemic linguistic phenomena. The core aim of these efforts is more accurately seen as enhancing epistemic practicality. Put simply, the new direction to defend epistemic relativism seeks not just any explanation, but one that supports and sustains our epistemic linguistic practice. This objective is apparent in epistemic relativists' attempts to make better sense of epistemic discourse than alternative theories. For example, with the acceptance of epistemic relativism, its proponents might suggest adopting a relativistic interpretation of typical epistemic judgments in their absolute form, rather than advocating their abandonment, thereby preserving their appropriateness. This proposal might face criticisms for its metaphysical assumptions, alteration of intended content, or not being sufficiently relativistic due to its definitive reinterpretation. Yet, a more thoroughly semantic relativistic proposal still argues that epistemic propositions' truth

value should be sensitive to assessment, in order to maintain a charitable interpretation of our epistemic language in terms of rationality, especially in scenarios like retracting previous statements. This latter approach, however, also encounters challenges, particularly in accommodating the intuition for cross-context evaluation in knowledge ascription.

The crux of the difficulty in asserting the plausibility of epistemic relativism regarding its practical significance lies in demonstrating its consistent advantage over other positions. Although each position may rationalize certain epistemic linguistic phenomena, none seems to provide a comprehensive solution encompassing the entirety of epistemic discourse. This situation, however, presents a dual viewpoint. On the one hand, it implies that the new arguments for epistemic relativism do not conclusively outshine other contenders. On the other hand, it results in a tense standoff between epistemic relativism and these alternatives. This latter point is more noteworthy given that epistemic relativism is not commonly a standard choice in epistemological stances, especially in contrast to the dominant absolutist interpretation of our epistemic discourse, which ostensibly aligns with paradigmatic assertoric epistemic claims. In this light, the challenges confronting epistemic relativist arguments, particularly their lack of sufficient metaphysical justification, can be viewed differently. Rather than being inherently flawed, these arguments might be seen as not less justified compared to the prevailing stance, which also struggles with substantiating its assumptions about absolute epistemic standards. Thus, by rising as a strong competitor against more established positions, epistemic relativism achieves a form of success by gaining increased attention and acknowledgment in the field.

This change in perspective steers the dissertation towards exploring why epistemic relativism is initially overshadowed in philosophical discussions, mainly by epistemic absolutism. The latter not only serves as the default conventional understanding of epistemic discourse but is also commonly seen as the contrasting standard against which other theories, such as epistemic relativism, are compared or critiqued. The implicit approval of absolutism is particularly evident when epistemic relativism's deviation from dominant epistemology — stemming from its relativization of knowledge — is cited as grounds for its rejection. This argument arises not just from concerns about the feasibility of an expanded application of relativist treatment but also from an intuitive defense of

traditional epistemology that inadequately acknowledges epistemic relativism. A more in-depth analysis reveals a deeper conflict between the dominant interpretation of our epistemic discourse and epistemic relativism. Specifically, beneath the first-order debates, there are two distinct second-order commitments. The mainstream commitment is typically associated with what is interpreted as metaepistemological realism, which presupposes the existence of independent epistemic facts that should be mirrored in our epistemic judgments. This implies the presence of universal epistemic facts that provide categorical reasons for epistemic actions. In contrast, epistemic relativism, suggesting an escape from absolute epistemic standards, inherently conflicts with this intuition, resulting in its instinctive dismissal. That said, these points merely offer an explanatory reason for the reluctance to embrace epistemic relativism, especially among epistemologists. This resistance appears to need further justification to be considered appropriate. Yet, given the theoretical stalemate between these positions, identifying such justification is challenging. Both stances face difficulties in substantiating their underlying metaphysical or ontological presumptions: for realists, the existence of accessible absolute epistemic facts, and for relativists, their relative counterparts.

However, viewing the situation only from the standpoint of a challenger risks oversimplification. A critical aspect often overlooked is the trust in the established position, which has accumulated through past experience. In other words, our epistemic discourse functions conventionally not just by default but also because of an implicit recognition of its effectiveness. If our procedures were notably unsatisfactory, we would naturally seek alternative methods. Yet, this is not the case with the epistemic discourse. Specifically, our epistemic activities have proven fruitful, to which our epistemic linguistic practice contributes greatly, particularly in facilitating the connection between epistemic agents and the exchange of information. Therefore, the use of epistemic language can be considered quite beneficial. This understanding suggests that although finding a justification based purely on epistemological theory for the continued use of the established epistemic discourse might be challenging, a justification based on practical utility is readily available. It is thus reasonable to set aside stances advocating epistemic linguistic patterns that deviate from the mainstream, which predominantly features absolute epistemic assertions.

Consequently, with the lack of prevalence of relativistic attitudes in mainstream epistemic discourse, sidelining epistemic relativism becomes a sensible choice.

Nevertheless, embracing traditional epistemic linguistic practice does not necessarily mean endorsing its prevailing philosophical interpretation, specifically metaepistemological realism. This stance continues to struggle with its own metaphysical burden, which appears superfluous when justifying the preservation of conventional epistemic discourse on the grounds of a practical reason. In this context, it is the continuation of relevant linguistic habits that truly matters; any further theoretical explanation, especially one involving burdensome and unproven assumptions, appears unnecessary. This shift in focus results from a change in how we rationalize our use of epistemic language. We move from trying to prove that the typical assertoric form of epistemic judgments and claims is inherently correct because it aligns with what is supposedly represented, to a retrospective evaluation of the language used, offering retroactive plausibility. The key here is to view our epistemic linguistic practice primarily as a part of a larger epistemic process, driven by our epistemic desires and intertwined with collective epistemic endeavors. We evaluate its effectiveness through its association with desirable outcomes, rather than as alignment of natural language with pre-set epistemic facts. This process understanding of epistemic discourse, also termed metaepistemological expressivism in the dissertation, redirects attention from how epistemic language is matched with reality, to the phenomenon that epistemic assertions frequently occur without direct reference to epistemic facts, yet still play a functional role in both individual and collective epistemic activities. In short, this approach proposes to maintain the current successful operation of epistemic discourse drawing on a practically justifying reason, without the burden of ontological assumptions.

The process understanding holds several positive advantages over other theories too. For instance, by including the desires of epistemic agents behind their actions in the account, it more effectively elucidates how subjects are motivated by epistemic reasons rooted in epistemic standards that they consider appropriate. Nevertheless, it also faces potential difficulties. A primary concern revolves around its failure to clarify the nature of the established pattern. While something may appear productive, it might not function as anticipated. Consequently, there may be reservations about maintaining a practice whose

inherent worth, despite practical utility, remains unproven. The expectation here is that a useful process should function reliably and comprehensibly as intended. Addressing this issue involves emphasizing the close relationship we maintain with our practice as an integral process. Such an approach allows interpreting difficulties not as reasons to abandon the course entirely but as fluctuations needing adjustments. Therefore, if conventional epistemic discourse presents obstacles to human epistemic endeavors, it is never too late to modify it. That said, it seems that the moment for such significant change has not yet arrived. It thus remains advisable to adhere to the existing practice of epistemic discourse, though a degree of caution and further examination is still needed.

However, this idealized view of the agent-practice relationship somewhat glosses over real-life complexities. In reality, when faced with significant challenges, it is conceivable that an individual might simply choose to discontinue their engagement. This consideration becomes evident when recognizing that realism does usually occupy a central position in philosophical discussion, suggesting that it likely offers some notable benefits despite its controversies. Indeed, epistemic realism provides more than just an explanation. For example, it typically offers a more consistent framework for understanding epistemic language. While addressing this may not be an immediate concern for alternative approaches, a more pressing issue is realism's ability to intellectually support the epistemic discourse. Specifically, its acceptance implies a clear directive for action, offering long-term assurance about the correctness of our choices. This assurance enables epistemic realism to not only explain epistemic discourse but also purport to sustain its continued operation by legitimizing it theoretically. In contrast, the process understanding largely depends on past experience and cannot offer a similar guarantee of future success. It lacks the means to provide an external perspective for indicating the objective correctness of our epistemic linguistic practice. The worry here is not only about potential future modifications but also the inability to establish a positive understanding that counters pessimistic views, which might lead to a cessation of practice altogether. Instead of suggesting that we satisfy the natural desire to seek external validation for credibility and significance in our participation in epistemic discourse, as realists might propose, this dissertation argues against the need to take this inclination seriously as a way to address the issue.

These discussions culminate in a dual interim conclusion responding to the first task of this dissertation, which is to explore the deeper nature of the sought-after concept of wisdom. It emerges that considerations about wisdom, especially the truth condition question, can be approached using mainstream epistemology, though with some reservations. These reservations include acknowledging that our current understanding may not be definitive and could require further examination or refinement. Given this foundation, the dissertation turns to tackle the specific issues surrounding wisdom. It begins by examining the predominant tradition in epistemology concerning the truth condition question, namely, epistemic value truth monism, or veritism. This long-lasting position asserts that truth is the fundamental epistemic good. A robust defense of this view is based on the premise that truth, specifically epistemically grounded truth, is the ultimate goal for intellectually virtuous inquirers, who are idealized epistemic agents generally admired and emulated by their peers. It follows that any significant epistemic notion should maintain relevance with this concept of truth. This argument is scrutinized in the context of the coexistence of plausible wisdom concepts that both necessitate and do not necessitate true beliefs. The discussion results in a conception of wisdom that still regards appropriately grounded true beliefs as an essential component but views wisdom as more fundamental as it determines the scope of truth that is significantly relevant. This view not only provides an answer to the truth condition question about wisdom but also suggests that wisdom, rather than truth, might be the ultimate epistemic pursuit. This distinctive role of the concept of wisdom leads to a perspective for approaching the general theorization of wisdom in terms of the idealized epistemic process.

This interpretation of wisdom, drawing upon its position within the epistemic process, is fundamentally grounded in the process understanding of epistemic discourse. This connection stems not just from a foundational relationship but also from a shared inclination to view epistemic practices primarily as driven by epistemic desires and can be retrospectively evaluated, rather than assessing them based on their initial correspondence to epistemic facts, such as “epistemic activities ultimately aim at truth.” However, a slight distinction might be beneficial. The process interpretation of our epistemic linguistic practice may generally influence how various epistemic notions, including the epistemic concept of wisdom, are understood. In this context, a process theory of wisdom specifically

focuses on wisdom and posits that it could serve as the ultimate pursuit in epistemic processes. While this dissertation underscores both aspects of this dual process understanding, the proposed process theory of wisdom, against the backdrop of the overarching process understanding of epistemic endeavors, more directly connects to the unique role of wisdom.

The development of a process theory of wisdom in this dissertation is derived from two main sources: the actual practice of making epistemic judgments about wisdom, which is essentially an evaluation from a first-person perspective, and the concept of wisdom as the ultimate epistemic goal as discerned by idealized epistemic agents. These considerations lead to an interpretation of the use of “wisdom” as primarily expressing an individual’s recognition of an idealized epistemic outcome. This leads to the following proposal:

**(PT1):** Subject  $S_1$  judges Subject  $S_2$  as wise, if and only if  $S_2$  has achieved the ultimate epistemic goal of and through an epistemic process that  $S_1$  considers to be ideal. Subjects  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  can be the same person or different individuals.

Conceptualizing wisdom in this manner effectively addresses the main issue surrounding the normative generic concept of wisdom. The crux is that PT1 functions as a meta-theory, facilitating the understanding of the interrelationships among various plausible expectations for the wise. It can harmonize different perspectives by offering a unified framework, while preserving diverse and reasonable requirements of wisdom within individual evaluative perspectives. This accommodates them within the broader epistemic discourse as a part of the collective epistemic process. Importantly, this approach does not suggest a relativistic treatment of wisdom, as it does not pertain to the ultimate validity of any specific requirement. Nor does it suggest an absolute answer to end the debates surrounding wisdom. In essence, PT1 addresses the concern by elucidating the debates’ origins instead of offering an exclusive definition of wisdom. It posits that disputes over the nature of wisdom are not necessarily problems to be solved, but rather integral parts of the ongoing epistemic process that make sense within the course of practice. The primary purpose of PT1 is to aid in understanding the sense made here, rather than to deliver a definitive answer of what wisdom is, as might often be anticipated.



PT1 emerges as a strong contender in accounting for wisdom, additionally because it addresses other outlined prominent issues associated with wisdom. For example, by incorporating evaluative subjects into the theory, PT1 underscores the role of epistemic agency, thus offering a clearer depiction of the potential source of the expected normative force behind the concept of wisdom. Furthermore, PT1 may navigate the worries about the practical aspect of wisdom by shifting focus from the actualization of wise judgments to agents' awareness of such actualization. In doing so, it tackles the challenge posed by those exceptional cases where the anticipation that wise individuals will yield practical outcomes is not fulfilled. However, as a meta-theory, PT1 requires the inclusion of specific perspectives to introduce concrete expectations for the wise and to offer a tangible characterization of wisdom. This need becomes urgent when taking into account a wisdom theory's expected role in informing individuals on how to discern and cultivate wisdom. The basic framework established earlier in this dissertation can be seen as a compatible specification within the mainstream context, offering practical guidance for being recognized as wise in relevant scenarios. The integration of this plausible theoretical framework demonstrates PT1's ability to not only address mainstream expectations for wisdom but also provide meaningful guidance in various contexts, whether typical or atypical. However, given the scope of this dissertation, a more detailed exploration of specific theories of wisdom is reserved for future extended research.

Another avenue for future study emerges from this auxiliary assumption: The process understanding of epistemic discourse might also apply to other epistemic concepts like knowledge, which typically attracts primary interest in epistemology. This raises the question: What specifically prompts this line of thinking in the context of wisdom? The most direct impetus is the presence of conflicting yet plausible conceptions of wisdom. This phenomenon is more pronounced in discussions about wisdom than in those about other epistemic concepts. While epistemic relativism often revolves around knowledge assertions, simultaneous acknowledgment of contradictory knowledge claims is rare. Yet, in the context of wisdom, this seems more acceptable. The greater tolerance for conflicting views in wisdom discourse, as opposed to knowledge discourse, may reflect a difference in their practical urgency. After all, discerning wisdom is less immediately pressing than discerning knowledge, as determining someone's reliability as an informant is usually

more urgent than concluding whether one is wise, which may only become apparent over time. However, if this accounts for the greater tolerance in conceptualizing wisdom, it suggests the potential for a deeper influence of practical factors in shaping epistemic concepts. Therefore, this observation might invite further intriguing exploration that warrants a separate inquiry.

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