INTERROGATING THE OPINIONATED LIFE: AN EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH PYRRHONIAN SKEPTICISM

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It is better to be happy than it is to be right.
-Terry (the author's father)

Education quite often sends the message that life involves choosing a "thesis" and defending it against objections. Educators frequently require students to "pick a side," justifying their positions with the best reasons available. Writing courses celebrate the argumentative essay, where students are taught to form an opinion and endorse a particular point of view. The goal in such exercises is to prove that one's own position is the correct one. The educated mind, educators seem to assume, is a mind that is full of opinions, positions, and justified beliefs. But, really, is that the message that educators should be sending? On a more meta-level, beyond the merits of this or that particular belief or opinion, what should we teach students about the value of holding opinions and beliefs? Should they believe in belief? Are there costs to living an *opinionated* life? When thinking of such questions, I think of my equanimous father who, watching people argue on TV or listening to a family squabble, would sigh and say, "It is better to be happy than it is to be right."

Little did my father know he was agreeing with the ancient skeptical philosopher Pyrrho of Elis, who warned about the dangers of holding beliefs and opinions.[1] According to Timon of Phlius, Pyrrho's student:

> Pyrrho declared that all things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable. For this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore for this reason we should not put our trust in them one bit, but we should be unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it no

[1] In this paper, I focus on one particular version of ancient skepticism, the Pyrrhonian version. Other versions, such as the so-called Academic Skepticism of Carneades, had a more Socratic feel and lacked the emphasis on the alleged emotional benefits of skepticism.

> more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not.[2]

No record exists of why, exactly, Pyrrho himself denied the existence of epistemic standards. In a grand attempt to be consistent, Pyrrho did not leave any written records of his own philosophical opinions and arguments. From what we can glean from other early Pyrrhonists, however, it seems that Pyrrho's version of ancient skepticism held that the mind has no access to things apart from sense perception, that sense perception does not guarantee that we perceive things as they really are, and therefore, that there is no way to know the true nature of things.[3]

The ancient skeptics claimed to have traveled along a certain psychological path. Finding themselves in the clutter of conflicting truth claims, they had searched for criteria that would help them to choose among the competing opinions. Skeptical arguments, however, such as the famous sorites paradoxes, which show that many of our common terms are hopelessly vague, along with arguments suggesting the fallibility of sense experience, revealed that no criterion for truth exists, leaving all opinions intact with equal force. The skeptics found it necessary to suspend judgement (the *epochê*) and, in face of questions concerning the reality of the world, to say "that it no more is, than is not," thus refusing to hold opinions about the true nature of things.[4]

This does not entail, however, that the Pyrrhonists refrained from making judgments about the conduct of life. They did not deny that things *appear* to be a certain way. The later Pyrrhonists "affirm[ed] to appearance, without also affirming that is of such a kind."[5] In other words, the skeptic rejects that x *is* y, but accepts that x can *appear to be* y. Timon, a student and loyal follower of Pyrrho sums up the position with a famous example, "That honey is sweet I do not affirm, but I agree that it appears so."[6] Some level of opinion is okay, it seems, as long as it does not cut too deep, as long as it is qualified by the phrase "appears to me." This is a type of belief, to be sure, but not one that connects to any deeper truth about the reality of the world.

Pyrrhonian skepticism is, in many ways, quite similar to a Piercian pragmatism. Like the Pyrrhonist, the pragmatist also denies that we have access to a reality beyond human appearances. Knowledge for the pragmatist is simply

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[2] This is the summary of Timon by the ancient writer Aristocles, quoted in A. A. Long and D. N Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 14-15.

[3] For a thoughtful overview of the skeptic position, see A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 73-88.

[4] Attributed to Aristocles [I changed this to the spelling you used above but please confirm the spelling just in case.], quoted in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 15.

[5] This is in a fragment from Diogenes Laertius. Quoted in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 15.

[6] Long and Sedley, 15.

what appears to us to be the case after we have carefully investigated a matter (after we have "tasted the honey" as the skeptics might say). The major difference is that the pragmatist is willing to apply the term "knowledge" to these clear and consistent appearances, however provisional, while the skeptic is not. Put another way, the difference is that the skeptic *celebrates* the fallibilism, mining it for its emotional advantages in navigating human life. The pragmatist, in contrast, seems driven by fallibilism to continual cycles of investigation and to an attitude of openness toward what may come, using the idea of truth as a regulative ideal.

Why would the Pyrrhonists celebrate their lack of belief? The skeptics posited that suspension of judgement, the *epoché*, came with one important consequence, namely, by withdrawing from need to hold an opinion, the skeptics found that they experienced greater peace and tranquility of soul, *ataraxia*. Adopting "speechlessness" the skeptics found "freedom from disturbance." By assenting only to appearances, the skeptic believes that he or she can create a life of *ataraxia*. At times, achieving this peaceful state seems to be the overriding concern of the Pyrrhonists. They were concerned about achieving a certain quality of life, not epistemological consistency or doctrinal purity. At bottom, for them, we should live in such a way so as to promote *ataraxia,* and *ataraxia* will come through the *epoché.*

This is an aspect of Pyrrhonian skepticism that has been lost on the philosophical world. Refuting the arguments of skeptics – both ancient and modern – has become a cottage industry in philosophy, but the critical engagement focuses on the epistemological side of the debate: do we really lack any standards for knowledge? Lost, though, is the ethical side of the Pyrrhonist position, which posits a role for skepticism in the good life. That is, little philosophical energy has been spent analyzing whether skepticism is a pathway to happiness. What we find is some discussion of whether it is possible for a skeptic to hold any ethical beliefs,[7] but very little questioning of whether skepticism can lead to the benefits that are claimed. On epistemic grounds, I am tempted by a pragmatist approach to knowledge, but I still wonder, with the skeptics, if there is also something to celebrate in the denial of knowing. I wonder if there is a value to giving up on the quest to "be right." And I wonder what can be said for the skeptical side when it comes to the work of education.

SKEPTICAL COHERENCE AND TEACHING THE GOOD LIFE

Before turning directly to the question of skepticism and happiness, we should ask whether a committed skeptic can coherently hold *any* beliefs about a

[7] See, for example, Myles F. Burnyeat, "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" in *Doubt and Dogmatism*, eds. Malcolm Schofield, Myles Burnyeat, and Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 20–53. An important exception is Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

good human life. They cannot say, after all, that the life of skepticism and *ataraxia* really *is* a better way to live. This would seem to be a pronouncement of knowledge, an affirmation of belief, which the skeptics are trying to avoid. And, even if skeptics are allowed such ethical beliefs, how could they justify *teaching* such beliefs? Feeling justified enough to teach or publicly endorse a position seems to imply an even greater surety of that belief than does simply holding the belief. The skeptics seem to be caught in a quandary both when they claim an ethical position and when they try to convince others of that position.

The skeptical response to this quandary again goes to the distinction between appearance and reality. The skeptic can say that a form of life *appears* to be better than another. The consistent appearance of *ataraxia*, the skeptic might argue, is sufficient warrant to use the language of approval or disapproval in judging forms of human life. Hellenistic scholars Long and Sedley assert that the identification of the divine and good life with "equability" is carefully circumscribed by the phrase "*as it appears to me*:"

> The Pyrrhonist is as entitled as anyone else to tell us how things appear to him, and to guide his life accordingly. He is also entitled to invite those who accept his indeterminable world to draw from it the same practical inferences that he does, and to describe the resulting mental state in the conventional language of approval. Having arrived at equipoise, he finds himself giving supreme value to everything that enables him to maintain this state.[8]

The skeptic can, without contradiction, affirm that one life appears to be desirable, just like any other claim about appearances. But, still, the skeptic seems bereft of strategies of persuasion. In order to persuade, to engage in the practice of teaching, the skeptic needs to come up with convincing reasons. Convincing reasons do not come easily to a skeptic, who has given up on finding a defensible criterion for knowledge. How, then, can the skeptic persuasively challenge others to live differently, while still staying on the level of appearances?

One possible approach to skeptical teaching might be through exemplarity, that is, by pointing and reflecting. By turning to an example, the skeptic offers a taste of a particular way of living. Indeed, if one looks at the Pyrrhonian tradition, this is exactly the method one sees. Timon, Pyrrho's student, was especially impressed by the presence, disposition, and emotional life of his teacher. For Timon, Pyrrho was not so much a theorist, but an exemplar for himself and others to follow; indeed, he often drew attention to the life of his master using the most glorious language: "Truly," he proclaimed, "no other mortal could rival Pyrrho."[9] He is said to have described his mentor in this way:

[8] Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 21.
[9] Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 18

"Such was the man I saw, unconceited and unbroken by all the pressures that have subdued the famed and unfamed alike, unstable band of people, weighed down on this side and on that with passions, opinions, and futile legislation."[10] He pointed to the quality of Pyrrho's life, while also noting Pyrrho's skepticism: "O old man, O Pyrrho, how and whence did you discover escape from servitude to the opinions and empty theorizing of the sophists? How did you unloose the shackles of every deception and persuasion? You did not trouble to investigate what winds prevail over Greece, from when all things arise and into what they pass."[11]

Pyrrho's life is revealed as a beacon to humanity, indicating the way to a realm of undisturbed peace and tranquility. Skeptics persuade others about the human good in the same way they might convince others of the sweetness of honey, namely, by giving students the experience of honey and then by having them reflect on that experience. Pointing to the life of Pyrrho was Timon's way, in effect, of giving students a taste of skeptical life. With this taste, the student can then decide whether or not such a life appeared to be sweet or sour. This approach, pointing toward exemplars and reflecting on the appearances, makes pedagogical sense within the skeptical framework.

OPINIONS AND THE GOOD LIFE

There is, then, a certain coherence to the Pyrrhonist position. Staying at the level of appearances, skeptics can plausibly endorse an ethical position and they have tools of persuasion available to engage in the practice of teaching. Now, we turn to the substance of the matter, the question of the relationships among the good life, skepticism, and education. It is reasonable, I believe, to posit that education should be, at least in part, about promoting human happiness. Nel Noddings makes this case quite persuasively in her book, *Happiness and Education*.[12] Happiness, she argues, is a near universal human value, yet it is often ignored in discussions of educational aims. She daftly explores the different dimensions of happiness and probes how schools can contribute to its formation. With Noddings, then, let us assume that the promotion of human happiness should be a major goal of education.

In the discussion below, I conceptualize happiness largely in terms of "subjective wellbeing." This is a bit more expansive than the Pyrrhonian view of *ataraxia*. Subjective wellbeing posits happiness as a combination of overall life satisfaction and a regular experience of positive emotions.[13] These positive emotions coincide with having life-moments that are perceived as rich, pleasant, fun, or rewarding. Also, the subjective wellbeing view of happiness is concerned with reducing negative emotions – that is, with reducing the perception of

[10] Long and Sedley, 18.
[11] Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 18-19.
[12] Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[13] Ed Diener, "Subjective Well-Being," *Psychological Bulletin* 95, no. 3 (1984): 542–75.

suffering. This is the strongest point of contact with the skeptical notion of *ataraxia*, which is a state of being peaceful and unperturbed. Subjective wellbeing is widely researched, and we know some things about what contributes to happiness understood in this sense. Factors influencing subjective wellbeing include: family, friends, community, financial stability, health, freedom, rewarding work, and values.[14] In this analysis, I will focus on whether being opinionated contributes to these sorts of things. Beyond being useful for this purpose, the concept of subjective wellbeing also stays at the level of appearances and is thus at home with skeptical thought in that sense. Other substantive views of happiness, like religious views, and views that focus on metaphysical ends of human existence, might produce different conclusions but will also be more controversial and less in the skeptical spirit.

THE CASE FOR BELIEF IN PROMOTING HAPPINESS

We might initially examine the advantages of having opinions and beliefs when it comes to happiness. Specifically, the question involves opinions about the way the world really is – how does holding beliefs about *reality* contribute to a sense of wellbeing? First, there is a sense in which opinions and beliefs, supposedly based on reality, give us a sense of *control* over our own lives, a sense of direction among choices and uncertainty. Deeply held religious beliefs, for example, give people an understanding of what they need to do to be right with God and the universe, while beliefs about justice give people a sense of purpose, a possibility of promoting real positive values in the world. In short, a belief that one grasps reality gives people a sense of mastery over their destinies, a sense of the road to follow, and an assurance that things will fall into predictable patterns. This sense of control promotes a sense of wellbeing.

There is a sense of *pleasure and power in knowing*, a feeling that one possesses special insight into the true nature of things. There is a satisfaction in feeling like we understand something, like we possess a bit of the world within our souls. There is also a sort of self-esteem that comes when we think of ourselves as knowers. When we feel like we grasp some order or beauty outside of ourselves, there can come a sense of awe or astonishment, sometimes in the form "ecstatic" or "peak experiences," which contribute to the positive emotions associated with happiness (mathematicians, for example, often describe a sense of wonder in contemplating mathematical truths). These satisfactions are particularly strong when we feel like we possess truths that few other people possess. Like the ancient Gnostics (literally, "knowers") who sought salvation in secret knowledge of the divine, the possession of esoteric knowledge helps individuals to feel unique and vindicated in their existence. Perhaps it feeds egotism, giving pleasure in being set apart, even superior, to others. This pleasure

[14] Richard Layard, *Happiness* (London: Penguin, 2005), 62-70. Of course, the skeptics wouldn't use empirical research to support their opinions. Using this research, however, might allow us to see any parallels and disjunctions between what this research shows and what the skeptics predicted.

in knowing what others do not know may partly explain the attraction of conspiracy theories. Both the sense of control and the pleasurable identity of being a knower can contribute to the positive emotional experiences that are part of subjective wellbeing.

Beliefs and opinions also play a role in happiness through their *construction of communities*. Coming together with others around beliefs and opinions can create a sense of connection and shared purpose. This allows for relationships of intimacy and mutual concern, which are pillars of human happiness. The community might form around publicly affirmed truths, as in the case of religious groups, or it might form around a common search for truth, as in scientific or scholarly communities. These communities play an important part of identity formation and also give pleasures and purpose beyond the knowledge claims themselves. This contributes to the social connection that the research shows is so essential to a happy life.

A belief in belief might spur an *expansive and exploratory attitude* toward life, feeding inquiry and unlocking a search within dimensions of experience that would otherwise remain closed. Skepticism seems to undermine the need to investigate, as the skeptics themselves acknowledged and sometimes celebrated (recall Timon praising Pyrrho for not troubling "to investigate what winds prevail over Greece"). Belief in knowledge gives an incentive to investigate the world, a drive to unlock its secrets and to probe its mysteries. Searching for new experiences, testing beliefs against the evidence of life, seems to be a noble occupation, but it might also uncover new ways of doing things, new possibilities that increase human freedom or relieve suffering. Relatedly, a strong skepticism leaves the world "as it is," unknowable and, therefore, unchangeable.

This point holds particularly true when it comes to a life of justice. When asked about how one was supposed to live without beliefs, the later Roman Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus replied, "For we follow a line of reasoning which, in accordance with appearances, points us to a life conformable to the customs of our country and its laws and institutions, and to our own instinctive feelings."[15] Here, the skeptical view leads to a troubling conservatism. Lacking in knowledge, Sextus Empiricus claims, the skeptic, seeking *ataraxia*, simply follows the existing customs, laws, and institutions of his or her society. There seems to be little room for social change; no drive toward justice. Some sort of knowledge, or some sort of belief in a better world, is necessary for any sort of social action. And social action would seem to benefit human happiness in the long run (some of the factors involved with subjective wellbeing, after all, are associated with the freedoms, prosperities, and value structures of the larger communities). In these ways, then, believing in the possibility of knowing, believing in belief, might aid the quest for happiness. If these reasons carry the day, then it seems appropriate for education to be largely about developing and defending theses – encouraging the development of beliefs and opinions.

[15] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books), 20-21.

THE CASE FOR SKEPTICISM IN PROMOTING HAPPINESS

The skeptics, however, could marshal reasons of their own. First, there is the *release of psychological tension and stress* that comes when one gives up the idea of being right. If one thinks about the endless energy spent on defending opinions, on proving one's beliefs superior to others, one sees an enormous investment of time and anxiety, often with little to show for it other than apprehension and suffering. One thinks of the comic strip by Randall Munroe. A stick figure sits at the computer, typing furiously. He is called to come to bed, but responds, "I can't. This is important. Someone is wrong on the internet." This captures well the wasted energy, and the futility, of the task of defending one's opinions. Endless debates on social media produce more inner stress than mutual enlightenment. These debates increase the negative emotions that work against subjective wellbeing.

This quest to prove oneself "right" in one's opinions can *devastate human relationships and communities*. Think of the friendships, neighborhoods, and marriages that have disintegrated because individuals were focused on "being right" in their opinions, even their opinions concerning common, everyday things: I picked up the tab last night, not you; I did the dishes yesterday, you didn't; your fence is on my property, not yours. Consider the finding that "61% of social media users have unfollowed, unfriended, or blocked a connection on social media because of that person's political views or posts."[16] I suspect that the simple need to "be right" is part of the psychology behind this. It infects relationships like an insidious virus, destroying that which is most important to human happiness: meaningful human connection.

And, while it is true that beliefs and opinions seem to give one a sense of intelligibility and control over human existence, all too often this is an *illusory sense of control* and gives rise to *inflated life expectations*. Life is characterized by the unexpected, the unplanned, the unsought, and the unimagined. One state of affairs quickly transforms into another. Beliefs lead to expectations. When the unexpected things invariably happen, for the knower, the pain of the moment is compounded by the sting of disappointment and disillusionment occasioned by the unmet expectations – "things," we assert, "*should have been different*." Julia Annas points out that, true enough, all human beings will suffer, even skeptics. The skeptic, however, is in a better position to deal with the pain: "For the main reason that we are troubled by things like physical pain is that we believe them to be bad; so the sceptic, who merely suffers the pain, is better off than the dogmatist, who believes the pain to be a bad thing."[17] Beyond disappointment, another undesirable consequence of belief is the assault on the self-esteem of the knower that comes through thwarted epistemic expectations. The curveballs of

[16] Emily Goodwin, "The Majority of Americans are also Social Distancing from Politics," *Civic Science*, September, 9, 2020, https://civicscience.com/the-majority-of-americans-are-also-social-distancing-from-politics/.
[17] Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, 355.

life often make the believer feel foolish and inadequate. The skeptic would say that life is hard enough without an extra burden of opinions and beliefs, and the expectations that come with them, for how life is and how it should be. Even when things seem to be turning out badly, the skeptic points to a legitimately comforting truth: we don't know what the final end of our stories will be. Great pain sometimes leads to unexpected benefits, while pleasure and ease can lead to unexpected costs.

This final point deserves a bit more elaboration from the perspective of the skeptic. It is not uncommon to find that the unexpected and unsought is better than what we thought we wanted ("I didn't get the food I ordered," we might say, "but I think what I ended up with was even better"). Life itself has a way of shattering our opinions and preconceptions, sometimes for the worse, but often for the better. Our opinions about what we think we want look naive in hindsight as we find new and better possibilities. We might even ask, What is gained in terms of happiness by having strong opinions, tastes, exacting standards? Suppose, for example, we have strong opinions about food: there are types we like and types we despise. What happiness does it bring to have such strong preferences? It may shut down exploration of new possibilities for one thing, but it also makes a person more difficult to satisfy – it increases the share of the world that is undesirable and disagreeable. For many domains of life, to coopt John Stuart Mill's phrasing, it seems better to be that swine, easily made happy, rather than being the Socrates, with high standards but always unsatisfied. Opinions, tastes, likes, and dislikes – discriminating tastes – are sometimes better left underdeveloped if happiness is the goal.

What about motivation to inquiry and social change? Although the skeptic faces real problems here, there may be *resources within Pyrrhonism that are conducive to inquiry and social change*. Recall that the skeptic is still able to acknowledge that life appears one way or another, that honey indeed appears to be sweet. The skeptic does not argue that these appearances are meaningless or unimportant. Appearances still appropriately guide one's life, but they should be followed tentatively, with both caution and openness. After all, there might be other things that appear to be sweet besides honey, and there might be other sensations that appear more pleasant than sweetness. This gives the skeptic an incentive to explore the world of appearances, to engage in this surface world more deeply than one might expect. As Julia Annas writes in her discussion of the skeptical position, "What is natural and unavoidable for us, is not passivity towards our appearances – that would not be a human response – but an active, critical use of them."[18] The premise that honey "really is" sweet seems to play little role in motivating the ongoing inquiry.

The same sort of argument holds for engaging in acts of social change. In the absence of moral knowledge, the Pyrrhonist tradition advises us to simply follow the customs and laws of our cultures. Laws and customs, however, invariably conflict with each other – they are multifaceted, they require

[18] Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, 211.

interpretation, and they are always insufficient in the face of complex human experience. In such cases, falling back on custom and law is insufficient, and their implementation must also be guided by appearances. Recall that Sextus Empiricus's idea that "instinctive feelings" should also guide the Pyrrhonist. This appears to endorse conscience – the inner world of *moral appearances* we might say – as a sort of supreme guide to navigating the moral world, in addition to custom and law. There is much suffering and cruelty that appears in human life to the attentive and awake. There is no reason why the skeptics would be unmotivated to change the world of appearance to minimize such things, just as they would be motivated to seek the sweetness of honey. While we might ask for a deeper way to challenge moral "gut feelings" in the face of prejudice and complacency, the skeptical life need not be as conservative as it might first appear.

Also, while it is true that a belief in a better world is necessary for social justice work, we should also acknowledge that there are costs to rigid utopian thinking – the need to be right taken to extreme. Consider the horrors of China's Great Leap Forward or Germany's Third Reich. It does seem that our beliefs about better worlds should also be held with some degree of tentativeness, lest the specter of mass graves becomes tolerable or justifiable in pursuit of such worlds. A firm belief that one is right in building society can lead to trouble.

Finally, while there might be awe in knowing the world, there is also the sort of *wonder that comes in surrendering to the unknowable*. We seem to be rather tiny creatures, with tiny brains, inhabiting a tiny slice of the universe. A sense of awe and wonder can be invoked simply by thinking about the vastness that exists apart from us, a universe that is forever unknowable. As the author Marilynne Robinson writes:

> I believe that there is a penumbra of ignorance and error and speculation that exceeds what might be called the known world by a very large factor indeed. I believe this penumbra is as beautiful in its own way as what I have called truth because it is the action of the human consciousness. It is most human and most beautiful because it wants to be more than consciousness; it wants to be truth.[19]

To the skeptic, the universe is a vast mystery, full of desire to be known, perhaps, but always escaping the epistemic grasp of humanity. There is a sort of awe that this ignorance inspires. Skepticsm, it should be acknowledged, has its own version of ecstatic or peak experiences.

REFLECTIONS ON THE DESIRABILITY OF THE OPINIONATED LIFE

[19] Marilynne Robinson, "On 'Beauty,'" in *The World Split Open: Great Authors on How and Why We Write* (Portland, OR: Tin House Books, 2014), 126.

What to make of all of this? Who is right about the pathway to happiness, those who believe in belief or the skeptic? At this point, a pragmatist might chime in asking about the "cash value" of the skeptics' distinction between appearances and reality. If beliefs about appearances can inspire motivation to inquire and to change, if they can guide life, then it seems like this distinction is unhelpful, like it simply isn't doing any real work. I would respond that the work that is being done involves a particular stance toward ourselves as knowers, a stance that has a host of implications. The skeptical limitation to beliefs as relating only to appearances changes how one approaches the world and other people, even if much of the resulting action based on those beliefs is the same. Endorsing only "knowledge of appearances," the skeptic does indeed hold opinions, but with a different emotional and intellectual sensibility than even the pragmatist. She is less *invested* in the opinion, emotionally, holding it with a much lighter touch, in a way less connected to her fundamental identity. The question is, then, what should we make of these sensibilities in the creation of human happiness?

There seem to be nuggets of truth in both sides of the issue – both dogmatism and skepticism can contribute to happiness. The possibilities of the skeptical life, however, are perhaps more neglected and deserve wider hearing. The skeptic is wise to point out how the need to be right constricts our relationships and distorts us as people. I remember during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-21 being annoyed with people who were minimizing the risk and mocking those practicing safety measures. One day, I found myself cheering increased infection in red states, because, well, I wanted to be right in my opinion. I'm not proud of this: My moral personality had been distorted, it had driven a wedge between me and others. The skeptic wants us to be able to step back from identifying so strongly with our knowledge claims. Education should point out the dangers of placing our epistemic identities above our relationships with others.

The skeptics also correctly note how suspending judgment liberates us from certain stresses. There is a freedom that comes from simply opting out of contentious debates, particularly when there is little or no conclusive evidence. Does God exist? Is there life after death? Am I free to determine my own life? Misery can come simply by affirming one side of these questions, and then feeling like one has to constantly defend one's opinion to attacks coming from inside and out. With respect to many questions, the skeptic asks: Why bother having an opinion, since all available evidence is so fleeting and weak? In such cases, the only way to win the game may be not to play, to lack beliefs or opinions. Education should explore with students not just which position they will take, but whether it is advisable to have a position at all.

The idea that skepticism can be a sort of safety valve against the vagaries of life is also worth thinking about. Life will always turn out differently than we expect. Skepticism will allow us to anticipate such surprises and not judge them too harshly when they do occur. Skepticism can help disassociate our

beliefs from our identities, preserving an openness to new experiences while avoiding the devastation of disappointment. Marilynne Robinson again:

> All thought always inclines toward error… The mind is prolific in generating false narrative. Like the immune system, it can turn against itself, defeat itself … We have all forgotten what ought to be the hypothetical character of our thinking… We are inappropriately loyal to our hypotheses, rather than to the reality of which they are always a tentative sketch. This is a special problem in a climate of urgency and anxiety.[20]

Education should seek to preserve the hypothetical character of our thinking, to make it a part of our epistemic sensibilities. It needs to gently highlight moments when we are inappropriately loyal to the epistemic status quo.

While there is, then, much wisdom in the skeptical tradition, skepticism can also be the enemy of happiness when it leads to passivity, complacency, and immobility. We need some sense that there is something to learn in and from the world, that our powers to investigate are not so attenuated, and that some beliefs are better than others even though absolute truth of the world as it "really is" is either fleeting or impossible. This is the line that education – even an education for happiness – must walk. All of this is to say, I think, that education needs to promote a certain sort of fallibilism – a fallibilism not based only on questions of epistemology, but also of happiness; a fallibilism that does not mourn uncertainty but celebrates it. David Foster Wallace famously argued that "learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think."[21] Part of controlling how we think means making conscious choices about whether it is beneficial to have an opinion about something, before forming that opinion. If we have an opinion, it should be because we have chosen to have an opinion and not because we have simply reverted to an opinionated status by default. If nothing else, the skeptical tradition nudges us toward bringing opinions into the realm of rational calculation and eudemonistic judgment.

As I said in the beginning, sometimes educators put too much emphasis on students forming their own positions and points of view. In writing exercises, teachers demand students take positions on issues that they really know very little about. With this, schools send the message that the educated life is about defending your theses against those who would attack them. They plant the idea that education means living an opinionated life. To counter this trend, there are a few things that teachers can do to introduce elements of skepticism into their lessons. These things involve doing more to celebrate and recognize admissions of ignorance.

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[20] Robinson, "On 'Beauty'," 133, 136.

[21] David Foster Wallace, "This is Water by David Foster Wallace (Full Transcript and Audio)," FS: https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/.

I was recently struck by a passage from the author Nassim Nicholas Taleb. Here he is discussing Umberto Eco's library, famously vast, with many unread volumes. Interestingly, Eco celebrated his unread library – the unread volumes taunted him, reminding him of all that he did not know, and formed a type of "anti-library." Taleb reflects:

> We tend to treat our knowledge as personal property to be protected and defended. It is an ornament that allows us to rise in the pecking order. So this tendency to offend Eco's library sensibility by focusing on the known is a human bias that extends to our mental operations. People don't walk around with anti-résumés telling you what they have not studied or experienced (it's the job of their competitors to do that), but it would be nice if they did. Just as we need to stand library logic on its head, we will work on standing knowledge itself on its head.[22]

Why not have students work on their anti-resumes? Why not have them write papers about why they are unqualified to have an opinion about something? Or why nobody is qualified to have an opinion about something? Why not have them list all the books that they have not read, their "anti-bibliographies"? Taleb goes on to write about how we take our knowledge claims "a little too seriously." He paints the picture of a type of skeptic: "Let us call this an antischolar — someone who focuses on the unread books, and makes an attempt not to treat his knowledge as a treasure, or even a possession, or even a self-esteem enhancement device — a skeptical empiricist."[23] This idea of undermining the idea that knowledge is a treasure or possession, or a self-esteem enhancement, relates to the key idea of the ancient skeptics: disassociating beliefs from identities, letting go of the need to be right. We are more than the opinions we hold, the beliefs we profess, or the knowledge we think we have acquired. We are caught in webs of important human relationships that demand we give up on the quest to always "be right." Pyrrho was right about this. And so was my dad.

[22] Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2010), 1.
[23] Taleb, *The Black Swan*, 2.