



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Intellectual Humility for Coping

Michael Dickson

*Department of Philosophy, University of South Carolina*

### Abstract

This paper examines an approach to coping with persistent hallucination and delusion that the author has found to be more effective than standard ‘reality-testing’. The approach, characterized as a form of intellectual humility, involves making rapid judgments about one’s experiences, alongside a ready willingness to change those judgments as needed. The approach thus bears some connection to reality-testing, but may also be seen as partially overlapping with, and emerging from, the consideration of Pyrrhonian skepticism as a path to ‘tranquility’. The paper addresses an obvious objection to this approach, namely, that it is epistemically irresponsible and inconsistent with a genuine concern for truth.

### Keywords

Intellectual humility, hallucination, delusion, schizophrenia, skepticism

### History

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## 1. Introduction

In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, the enigmatic doctor and philosopher Sextus Empiricus appeals to the fact that those in an “unnatural” state may experience the world differently from those in a “natural” state, “as when the delirious or the divinely possessed believe they hear demons’ voices.”<sup>1</sup> This observation appears in a discussion of the so-called ‘fourth mode’, a manner of argumentation designed to question the reliability of perception and thus to discourage forming beliefs based on perception.

As Sextus observes, one might object that *only* those in an ‘unnatural’ state are in danger of non-veridical perception, due to their particular “admixture of certain humors” (*PH* I.102). He responds that it works both ways: “The healthy also have mixed humors... [and] these humors

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<sup>1</sup> Book I.101. Further references to this work are indicated by “*PH*.” Translations are the author’s. For a modern translation, see (Annas and Barnes 1994), and for *Against the Grammarians*, mentioned below, (Blank 1998).

too are capable of making an external object—whose nature *is* as it appears to those who are said to be in an *unnatural* state—to appear *other* than it is to *healthy* persons.” (ibid.).<sup>2</sup>

Sextus’ argument is that *all* of us, ‘healthy’ or otherwise, perceive using our bodies, the operation of which may produce representations that are incongruous to the external objects. The argument has been nicely illustrated some 1800 years later by an oft-repeated type of study of perception in ‘schizophrenic’<sup>3</sup> individuals. I once participated in such a study. Participants were shown images and asked to rate their degree of concavity on a scale of 1 to 5. The most well-known of these images is the ‘hollow mask’, something like a party-mask that may be presented with either the outside or the inside facing the viewer. I later learned that most people tend to see the mask as convex even when the inside is facing them. When the inside is facing me, I see it as the inside, as concave. I once asked a psychiatrist about this difference and was told that ‘schizophrenics’ have a “perceptual deficit,”<sup>4</sup> an answer that I accepted, having been told such things before. But later it struck me: Why are ‘schizophrenics’ the ones with the so-called deficit when we see it exactly as it is?

Maybe Sextus was right. We all see what might not really be there, just in different ways.<sup>5</sup> Maybe we should *all* suspend beliefs formed on the basis of perception. As will be discussed, Sextus taught that doing so can reduce anxiety for all of us. This paper will focus on the narrower issue of how one might mitigate the sometimes severe anxiety that ‘unnatural’,<sup>6</sup> or ‘psychotic’, experiences can engender.

The idea of discussing ‘psychosis’ in these terms comes from Jeppsson (2023), who, explicitly with reference to Sextus, discusses a skeptical strategy for dealing with demanding experiences. Motivated by her account, I pondered the connection between skepticism and my own strategy, which might be thought a form of intellectual humility.<sup>7</sup> It consists of making

<sup>2</sup> Sextus here describes misperception, but his example of hearing voices suggests that he also has in mind hallucination.

<sup>3</sup> Quotation marks are used around certain terms to reflect a doubt that they denote natural kinds. For a discussion of this point as regards diagnostic criteria, see (Jansson and Parnas 2007), and as regards organic causes, (Cumming, Abi-Dargham, and Gründer 2021). Among others, Tsou (2021, ch. 4) has argued that ‘schizophrenia’ is a natural kind, but the argument turns on the highly questionable dopamine hypothesis (Kendler and Schaffner 2011).

<sup>4</sup> This kind of language is common. Costa et al. (2023, 13), for example, frame their review in terms of “sensory-perceptual deficits in schizophrenia,” despite the fact that much of the evidence that they review involves the ‘schizophrenic’ participants giving veridical reports in cases where “healthy individuals” (their term) do not.

<sup>5</sup> For a version of this idea based on the contemporary sciences of perception, see (Hoffman 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Coming from a skeptic like Sextus, a term like ‘unnatural’ must be handled delicately. The term ‘psychosis’ is similarly tricky—it typically refers to ‘hallucination’ and ‘delusion’, themselves notoriously difficult to define, a difficulty often compounded by ignoring their inherently first-person aspect (Feyaerts et al 2021).

<sup>7</sup> In this essay personal details are kept to a minimum. For a brief personal account, see (Dickson 2024).

quick judgments about one's experiences and thoughts, but with a readiness to accept being wrong when circumstances demand. The beliefs resulting from such judgments help to define the environment, reducing paralyzing concerns about what is (or not) a part of what Jeppsson calls the "mainstream world", making decision-making, action, and social interaction easier. This strategy arises naturally, in a way to be described, from considerations that Sextus adduces in favor of suspension of belief.

Using this strategy, I cope reasonably well with potentially difficult experiences. However, it is important to acknowledge limitations. The strategy isn't a panacea. Sometimes it doesn't work—doubt can be overwhelming, leaving the world unstable and unclear. It has social downsides—I sometimes accidentally ignore people talking to me, having misjudged their voices to be hallucinated; and the opposite kind of mistake can bring unwanted attention from bewildered or concerned others.

In any case, the point is neither to tout nor to denounce any way of coping, including the standard strategy of reality-testing. 'Psychosis' is not one thing—differences in 'psychotic' experiences and the situations and dispositions of those who have them suggest that a diversity of approaches to coping ought to be taken seriously. The point, instead, is to explicate how an alternative to reality-testing, a strategy I will call 'intellectual humility', arises naturally from a consideration of skepticism. Accordingly, section 2 of this essay briefly sketches the standard strategy of reality-testing, focusing on how it was used in the 1990s (the period of time when I encountered it in a therapeutic context). Section 3 reviews certain aspects of skepticism, focusing Sextus' idea that adopting the skeptical attitude can reduce anxiety. Section 4 explicates the idea of intellectual humility, and addresses a challenge about the nature of desire (and one's reaction to unfulfilled desire) that is raised by it.

## 2. Reality Testing

There is no well-delineated standard treatment for 'schizophrenia', but it often involves the administration of psychiatric medication (which we will not consider further here) alongside some form of talk therapy, broadly construed. In the 1990s (when I first encountered the mental health system, in England), talk therapy was beginning (at least in certain circles) to include cognitive behavioral therapy (the immediate history of which goes back to the 1960s, but it began to be used for 'psychosis' around the 1990s).<sup>8</sup> A good example of what went into this sort of therapy is described by Bentall et al. (1994), and their version of it, specifically as adapted to auditory hallucination, will be taken as our example here.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For a standard textbook description of the time, see (Kingdon and Turkington 1994). For a (somewhat optimistic) review of the history and practice see (Turkington, Wright, and Courtley 2015).

<sup>9</sup> For a more recent example, similar in many respects, see (Wright et al. 2014, ch. 6). For a contemporary (and refreshingly honest and broad-minded) assessment of the approach from the point of view of two practitioners, see (Newman-Taylor and Bentall 2024).

The underlying assumption of their approach is that “hallucinators are deficient in the metacognitive skill of reality testing” (Bentall and Slade 1985, 159), or, as it was later formulated by Bentall et al. (1994, 53), that “hallucinations occur when private or mental events are not attributed to the self.” Accordingly, a primary goal of the treatment is “the gradual reattribution of the voices to the self” (ibid, 55), a process supposed to arise from improved ‘reality testing’. The idea is that previously the patient recognized all internal thought as originating in the self, and then at some point came to ‘attribute’ (presumably implicitly) some internal thoughts to one or more external agents, as a result of which, by a process that remains inside a black box, those thoughts are experienced with the “full force and impact” (ibid, 52) of an audible voice. The goal of treatment, then, is to get one to once again attribute those thoughts to oneself, the hope being “to reduce the frequency of voices and/or the distress associated with them” (ibid).<sup>10</sup> To help with this process, patients are encouraged (among other things) to consider various explanations for the voices, often by being told of various ways in which auditory hallucination can be induced (what Wright et al.; 2014, 131, call “psychoeducation about voices”).<sup>11</sup>

Some patients find this process helpful. I did not. To explain why, I will begin with an analogy to visual illusion.<sup>12</sup> The analogy is potentially a strong one inasmuch as the model of auditory hallucination adopted by Bentall et al. (1994), and which explicitly informs their approach to therapy, appeals to top-down cognitive effects on perception that are remarkably similar to the effects that are supposed to be at work in many visual illusions. The ‘inverted-mask’ illusion, mentioned earlier, is typically explained as a top-down effect imposed by a cognitive system that is primed to expect convex faces, not concave ones. A similar explanation has been proposed for the Müller-Lyer illusion.<sup>13</sup>

For present purposes, let us define ‘auditory hallucination’ as an auditory experience not shared by others who would normally be thought to be in a position to share it. There are some obvious differences between the visual phenomena just noted and auditory hallucinations in this sense; for example, the difference between the auditory hallucinator and

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Reality-testing’ often also refers to assessing the plausibility of the *content* expressed by voices, especially if the voices are critical or if they command or suggest actions that are ill-advised. The term applies in similar fashion to ‘delusions’. The content of voices and ‘delusions’ can be important therapeutically, and the former is explicitly included in the account of Bentall et al. (1994), but for reasons of space will not be considered here.

<sup>11</sup> Exactly why “psychoeducation about voices” is supposed to be compelling is not clear. The causal accounts that it offers *can* be relevant to one’s case, but they need not be. (Heart attacks can be induced by lightning strikes, but your particular heart attack might have nothing to do with the weather.) On the other hand, understanding that others have similar experiences can be helpful in its own way.

<sup>12</sup> As alluded earlier, it is a great irony (and probably one with import) that many persons diagnosed with ‘schizophrenia’ are unaffected by many standard visual illusions (Costa et al. 2023).

<sup>13</sup> For an early account of the inverted mask illusion see (Klopfer 1991) and for the Müller-Lyer illusion, (Howe and Purves 2004).

others is one of hearing ‘something rather than nothing’, while in the case of visual illusion everybody who can look sees *something*, albeit not the same thing. Even so, the case of visual illusion affords three helpful comparisons to auditory hallucination, and given the breadth of people who, apparently, experience visual illusion and the comparatively small number of people who experience auditory hallucination,<sup>14</sup> these comparisons may be helpful.

First, it appears to be very difficult for most people to ‘unsee’ visual illusions. Even when they *know* that the mask is convex, or that the lines are of equal length, they do not *see* them as such. For many who hear voices or other sounds not heard by others, a similar point holds. When I’ve determined that a sound—such as voice or music—is not heard by those around me, I don’t stop hearing it. As a consequence, *saying* to a therapist (or indeed to oneself) something like “this voice is really my own thought being projected into an external voice” can *feel* uncomfortably like a lie, especially in the absence of any account of how a thought becomes audible. It is as if, to mollify others, one were to say “I see the mask as convex” when in fact one continues to see it as concave.

Second, in the case of visual illusion, establishing the facts about the sources of what one sees is often easy. (Touch the mask. Measure the lines.) Determining the facts of the matter about auditory hallucination is *sometimes* similarly easy. For some people who hear voices, there is a consistent difference in phenomenal quality between hallucinated and non-hallucinated voices, and this difference might be, at least in principle, all they need to make the distinction. And even for those of us not in that situation, there still are many cases where distinguishing is easy—if a voice is whispering in my ear and there is nobody’s mouth near my ear, then I can easily judge that the voice is not coming from a person physically whispering into my ear. On the other hand, in a busy place, with many noises about, it can be very difficult to sort out what is what. If, in that situation, my ‘homework assignment’ as a patient is to figure out which voices to attribute to ‘myself’ and which to attribute to others, the task can quickly feel overwhelming—not like looking at the Müller-Lyer lines, measuring stick in hand, but more like being in a (perhaps not so) fun-house, brimming with the real and illusory side by side.

Third, visual illusions typically are not very salient to the concerns of those who see them—they are often presented in the manner of curiosities or party-tricks. Sometimes voices or other sounds are similarly irrelevant to one’s present concerns, but other times voices, in particular, are, or appear to be, *addressing* the one who hears them, sometimes concerning important matters. Dismissing them as ‘unreal’ can be difficult. (Imagine if the visual illusion were realistically threatening, for example.)

These comparisons to visual illusion are meant to highlight how and why ‘reality testing’ can be very challenging. In fact, for some of us, the situation is worse—a serious commitment to reality testing can exacerbate rather than alleviate the problem. The main problem (for me) is

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<sup>14</sup> The number is comparatively small, but lifetime prevalence is higher than people might realize (Maijer 2018).

uncertainty—general uncertainty about how (or whether) thoughts could become voices in the first place, and specific uncertainty about the ‘true cause’ of specific sounds, ultimately leading to uncertainty about how to act. For some time, encouraged by the idea that improved ‘reality testing’ would resolve this uncertainty, I pursued with gusto the task of verifying which sounds are hallucinated, and when I could nail down a cause I was blessed with a moment of clarity about how to act, and relief from anxiety. Too often, however, doubts remained and anxiety only got worse. (Now, in addition to wondering about how to act, I had to wonder about whether I had responsibly undertaken the task of reality testing.) Eventually I landed, instead, on the strategy I am calling ‘intellectual humility’, and the next two sections are an attempt to give a kind of philosophical (not historical<sup>15</sup>) genealogy of that strategy.

### 3. Sextus’ Case for Suspension of Belief

There is no space here for ducking into the corridors and backrooms of recent scholarship on skepticism.<sup>16</sup> What follows is a way to understand some cherry-picked ideas from Sextus, intended as the philosophical backdrop for an explication of intellectual humility as a strategy.

Sextus tells the following story about how and why people become skeptics (*PH* I.12):

The originating cause of skepticism is, we say, the hope of attaining tranquility. Talented people, confounded by the inconsistency in things, and at a loss about which of them they should indeed accept, came to investigate what is true in things and what is false, so that by the determination of these issues, they would attain tranquility. The highest principle of skepticism is that every account be opposed by an equal account, for by doing this, we think, we end up ceasing to dogmatize.

A serious investigation into what is true and false, undertaken for the sake of easing one’s mind about “the inconsistency in things”, leads one to realize that there are equally good arguments on both sides of any issue, and consequently to cease to endorse either side. (The term ‘skepticism’ is derived from the Greek term ‘σκέψις’ [skepsis], one meaning of which is ‘inquiry’.) Ceasing to dogmatize in this way, one discovers, by a kind of happy accident, that suspension of belief itself promotes a good life.

Sextus clarifies that by ‘dogmatize’ he means ‘to assent to a proposition that is non-evident’. Specifically, he allows (*PH* I.13) that the skeptic will assent to a ‘πάθος’ (pathos), ‘internal state’. As an example, Sextus allows that the skeptic who feels hot may reasonably assert “I feel hot”. And later (*PH* I.19–20) he further clarifies that in all cases one may grant that a thing *appears* (to oneself) to be thus and such. Propositions concerning how things appear to oneself are ‘evident’. The skeptic will *not* assert, however, that a thing *is* as it appears to be,

<sup>15</sup> The history is told (briefly) in (Dickson 2024).

<sup>16</sup> (Bett 2010) is a good place to start.

“affirming nothing about the external underlying things” (*PH* I.15). “I feel hot” is acceptable, but “the sun is hot” is not. Propositions concerning such things are ‘non-evident’. They concern matters for which a good case could be made both for and against, prompting the skeptic to withhold judgment.

And how does withholding judgment lead to tranquility (‘ἀταραξία’ (ataraxia), ‘lack of disturbance’)? One answer begins with the observation that among the non-evident propositions are those concerning what is, and what is not, truly good. Assent to such judgments, Sextus says (*PH* I.26–28; cf. III.237–238), leads to disturbance due to not having what is (supposedly) good, to losing what is good, or to fear of such loss.

It will be important for later that ‘disturbance’, here, is not synonymous with the pain of unfulfilled desire, or even unmet need. Sextus does not pretend that the skeptical stance prevents the experience of unsatisfied desires or needs, as if drink will always be supplied to the skeptic before the onset of thirst, or a paycheck before the bills are due. “Indeed we do not consider that the skeptic is wholly unbothered” (*PH* I.12), writes Sextus, “but we say that the skeptic is bothered [only] by things that are compelled,” mentioning thirst and cold as examples. A thirsty dogmatist, on the other hand, will be bothered by thirst *and disturbed*, the latter arising from an assent to the non-evident proposition that thirst is “bad by nature” (ibid). It is presumably no accident that Sextus distinguishes terminologically between ‘undisturbed’ and ‘unbothered’ using ‘ἀόχλητος’ (aochlētos) for the latter. *Anybody* may be (unavoidably) *bothered* now and again, but *disturbance* is a special (and avoidable) kind of suffering, arising from a perceived injury to one’s flourishing owing to the non-evident judgment that something is genuinely good (and missing), or bad (and present).

But note that many non-evident judgments do not concern what is good or bad—for example, the number of hairs on one’s head, or, to take an example from Sextus, the etymology of the word ‘λύχνος’ (luchnos), ‘lamp’. These judgments are ‘non-evaluative’. It is not clear how *non-evaluative* judgments cause disturbance in the sense and manner just described. Something else must be going on.

Thus, a second story emerges. Sextus seems to think that the disturbance following from evaluative judgments may also follow from non-evaluative judgments by the latter’s being tied to certain evaluative judgments. For example, in *Against the Grammarians*, Sextus discusses judgments about etymology (I.241ff), arguing that they are not founded on good evidence. He argues, for example (I.243), that nobody knows the ultimate origin of ‘λύχνος’ (lamp), even if one supposes (as Sextus fancifully entertains) that proximally it comes from ‘λύειν τό νύχτος’ (luein to nuchos), ‘to dissolve the night’, because this supposition merely pushes the question one step back. But while he is engaged in such arguments, the issue that seems to be in the background, and that is occasionally foregrounded, is what constitutes ‘good Greek’. He says, for example, that the Grammarians “wish to judge for all words whether they are Hellenic or not” (I.221). In other words, they seek to identify the *pure*, Hellenic, words, in order to advocate their use and discourage the use of ‘barbaric’ words.



More generally, this second story about how judgment leads to disturbance is that *non-evaluative* judgments about *non-evident* propositions will generate disturbance in virtue of an additional evaluative judgment about genuine goodness of some thing or other (for example, the purification of language).

This story explains how non-evaluative judgments may be disturbing, but does it do the job that Sextus needs? Are *all* non-evaluative judgments tied to some evaluative judgment in the required manner? And even if so, *must* they be? Indeed, why wouldn't the advice to one who is disturbed in this manner be to drop the offending *evaluative* judgments? One might, for example, counsel the Grammarians to get over their preoccupation with the alleged 'goodness' or 'badness' of words.

A third story suggests a response. Although Sextus' focused remarks about why assent leads to disturbance (and the consequent attractiveness of skepticism) typically invoke the disturbance caused by evaluative judgments, much of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* seeks to move the reader on purely epistemological grounds, by undermining alleged evidence for or against non-evident, non-evaluative, propositions. If avoiding disturbance is at all at stake, then apparently Sextus is addressing the person who is concerned not with the absence, loss, or potential loss, of any concrete good (such as 'purified Greek'), but with the absence, loss, or potential loss, of truth itself, an attitude that might indeed lead one to be, as quoted earlier, "confounded by the inconsistency in things" (*PH* 1.12).

The notion of being *disturbed* by the absence of truth suggests a connection back to the second story: Non-evaluative judgments of *all* kinds may be tied to what one takes to be good in virtue of the *evaluative* (and non-evident) judgment that truth (i.e., true belief) is a good. Consequently, one might be disturbed by the potential for incorrect judgment (a potential that one might, reading Sextus, come to feel is ubiquitous) because it implies the possibility of the absence or loss of the good of truth.

This third story is plausible, both as a reconstruction of Sextus' position and as a fact about some people, who *do* seem to take truth to be a good. Indeed, that fact about (some of) us can explain many cases where one feels some kind of aversion to, or disappointment at, being shown to lack the truth, even in trivial cases where the truth is otherwise of little consequence. Perhaps that feeling, at least in its more admirable forms, has something to do with valuing the truth.

Sextus is then counseling us to avoid disturbance by withholding assent from the non-evident proposition that truth is a good. To bring it back to the main topic: As we saw in the previous section, standard advice to 'psychotic' individuals who are faced with experiences or beliefs that others consider unreal or irrational is to learn reality testing, presumably so that they can come to possess a good, viz., the truth of the matter. What will happen when those people come to fear, or realize, that whatever they discover via reality testing is *also* on shaky ground? Jeppsson (2023), for example, relates that her experience of 'psychosis' can include



the sense of a tenuous reality, in which ‘normal’ assumptions, or ‘hinge commitments’—basic assumptions such as “there are many other people in the world” or “my perceptions more or less reflect the way things are”—become insecure or doubtful. In the light of such doubts, therapeutic attempts to “improve patients’ capacity for reality testing” (Landa *et al.* 2006, 11) can feel incoherent, insofar as those suspicious hinge commitments are presupposed by the usual ways of encouraging reality-testing (for example, by asking the patient to consider what most other people would think about a situation).

In place of reality testing, then, Sextus may be suggesting to stop worrying about truth. Give up on the idea that truth (specifically, of non-evident propositions) is a good and you can stop worrying about it.

One other aspect of Sextus’ vision of the tranquil life must be mentioned, given our main concern. Sextus insists (for good reasons) that the skeptic will live an outwardly ‘normal’ life, “following the laws, customs, and [one’s own] natural affections,” albeit doing so “undogmatically” (*PH* I.231), without assenting to non-evident propositions. Especially for some people who experience ‘psychosis’,<sup>17</sup> following one’s “natural affections,” on the one hand, and the laws and customs of one’s society, on the other, can be in serious tension.<sup>18</sup> It is consonant with the skeptical stance that one navigate those tensions in a manner that minimizes disturbance or other troubles, and here arises an important question that *any* successful strategy must find a way to address: How does one strike the right balance between ‘following one’s natural affections’ on the one hand, and ‘following the laws and customs of society’ on the other? (The question is often posed in terms of masking.) It is a difficult and complicated question that needed to be acknowledged here, but will not be pursued.

#### 4. Intellectual Humility

As mentioned above, having made a kind of leap of faith (and disliking medication), I tried the strategy of reality testing for some time, but repeatedly ran into problems. Reality testing can be impractical, or harmful, to the point of being borderline impossible, or at least ill-advised. In a crowded place, with a maelstrom of perceptions competing for one’s attention, a proper (“responsible”, as one doctor use to say) investigation into ‘what is real and what is not’ can be impractical or humiliating. The project of ‘confirming what is real’ can feel endless and hopeless. A commitment to reality testing often made me more, rather than less, anxious, and

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<sup>17</sup> The content, frequency, and duration of one’s experiences may contribute to whether or how this issue arises.

<sup>18</sup> Presumably most people occasionally suppress or alter actions encouraged by their ‘natural affections’ for the sake of propriety or amity. Some challenges to fitting in socially may be more severe than others, and poorly understood, the latter making it difficult for others to be sympathetic. For example, some persons with ‘schizophrenia’ (and ‘autism’) have a hard time understanding facial expressions, which can significantly hinder social integration and acceptance.

I eventually (and fortuitously) alighted on and learned to practice the alternative strategy mentioned earlier—make a quick and uncomplicated judgment and go with it. These judgments are not random; they are aimed at truth and guided by my own experience.

Suppose, for example, that I am having lunch with you and hear a voice coming from behind me. If your eyes don't react, I won't either. I'll note to myself (internally, and, after much practice, almost reflexively) that you do not hear the voice. I think of it as 'putting a flag' on that voice. Flagging represents a genuine belief in the usual sense of the term. For example, if the voice asks a question, I won't answer (because there's no speaker present to answer). If I were to be asked, in a normal manner, whether somebody else is there, I'd say (and genuinely mean) "no". And so on. I will harbor no explicit doubts about the matter—such doubts are exactly what kindles a compulsion for reality-checking, with all of the problems and anxiety that it entails. On the other hand, I am always open to new evidence—the flags are readily revised. This openness is critical because failing to revise can lead to all sorts of bad consequences.

There is a *remnant* of reality testing in this strategy. My judgment is aimed at certain *truths*. Is there a speaker present? Do those around me here it? But I'm not concerned to establish the 'true cause' of a voice, and certainly not worried about whether it is an 'externalized thought' (whatever such a thing may be). 'Flagging' is a cursory judgment based on slim evidence, and would (it is easy to imagine) be thought 'epistemically irresponsible' by many philosophers.<sup>19</sup> It certainly does not amount to 'confirming' what is or is not real, or true, and thus fails utterly to meet the standards I was encouraged to pursue when reality testing. Even so, I have found that it helps a lot to reduce anxiety by quickly putting everything in its place. Once one has clear beliefs about such matters, one can both stop worrying about them and take those beliefs as the basis for action. If something's place has to change later, based on new evidence, then it's still fine—things will then just have a new place.

This (still evolving) strategy did not explicitly arise from a reflection on skepticism, but reflecting, now, on Sextus' reasoning as reconstructed earlier, one might see the strategy as a natural conclusion. That reconstruction had three components:

- (1) Judgments concerning non-evident matters can (and perhaps always will) be undermined by new, or conflicting, evidence.
- (2) The possibility of undermining evidence creates disturbance, because it raises the possibility of the absence, loss, or potential loss of the good of truth.

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<sup>19</sup> The issue is complicated because philosophers do not agree about what sorts of reasons are legitimately involved in belief-formation in the first place. Moreover, 'belief' might not even be a univocal term. Alas, these matters cannot be pursued here. For recent discussion, see (Robitzsch et al. 2022) and the articles included in the special issue to which it is an introduction.

- (3) One can avoid (this kind of) disturbance by withholding judgment on the non-evident matter of whether truth (concerning non-evident matters) is a genuine good, thereby relieving one of the desire to make judgments about non-evident matters in general.

This reconstruction suggests that instead of giving up on the pursuit of truth (3), one could adjust one's attitude towards its absence, loss, or potential loss—find a way to make (2) false without denying that truth is a good. Why become disturbed when it becomes apparent that this good is absent, lost, or potentially lost? Here, then, is what we might call an 'ideal' of intellectual humility: Desire truth as a good, and (when appropriate) act on that desire, but do not be disturbed at the prospect (or actuality) of its absence or loss.

This 'ideal' (a word that might sound a bit grand but is not meant to), expressed in these terms, has sometimes seemed to me to highlight a problem with my strategy: How can one take truth to be a good, desire it, and act on that desire (by accepting or rejecting non-evident propositions), but *not* be disturbed by the absence, loss, or potential loss of the truth that one desires? The remainder of this paper will sketch an account of desire that addresses this question, in part by elaborating on the distinction between 'undisturbed' and 'unbothered' noted above (though not in a manner that Sextus would endorse).

The account is based on a reading of Aristotle, although no attempt will be made to justify it as such.<sup>20</sup> It begins with simple desires of appetite, such as the desire for drink. Aristotle suggests that in normal cases of desiring drink, the perception of water will be a perception of it *as pleasant* (and in that sense good), because one's body is in a certain painful state (diminished hydration). Hence the perception of water is, when (and because) one's body is in that state, an *evaluative* perception; it is a perception of water *as good*.<sup>21</sup> This evaluative perception of the water triggers a desire for water, which motivates one to act, for example to take or seek the water that one perceives. If the desire goes unfulfilled, then one experiences what we earlier called 'bother', which is just the bodily pain that disposed one to perceive water as good in the first place.

The judgment that truth is a good is not an evaluative *perception* but an evaluative *thought*.<sup>22</sup> Like evaluative perceptions, evaluative thoughts trigger desire—Aristotle calls such a desire 'βούλησις' (boulesis), 'intellectual desire', the term 'intellectual' indicating that the desire is triggered by a thought, not that it is the outcome of any intellectual process. The account is structurally similar to the account of appetitive desire: One thinks X as good (for oneself, in one's present circumstances), thereby generating a desire for X, thereby informing action.

<sup>20</sup>The present reading is more or less on the side of, and is much informed by, Moss (2012), somewhat in contrast to the reading of Pearson (2012).

<sup>21</sup>One could, mutatis mutandis, give a parallel account of 'perceiving as bad' (or as discussed later, 'thinking as bad').

<sup>22</sup>Moss (2012, esp. chs. 7–8) argues that such a thought is, more specifically, an Aristotelian 'phantasia', 'imagining'.

What leads one to *think* something as good in this manner? In the case of appetitive desire, ‘perceiving X as good’ occurs in virtue of a deficiency in the body, and a perception of X as capable of correcting the deficiency. Intellectual desire concerns the flourishing not of the body but of the human person. Specifically, intellectual desires are informed by one’s *character*, developed over time through experience. Character disposes one to associate pleasure (or pain—see note 22) with various states or activities, thereby to think them as good (for oneself, in one’s present circumstances), as contributing to one’s flourishing as a person.

Aristotle additionally spells out a specific conception of which things really do contribute to human flourishing, and some have argued that intellectual desire is ‘naturally’ a desire for these things (Grönroos 2015). The present account is not committed to these aspects of Aristotle’s theory, but only to the Aristotelian structure of desire, and the resulting account of the pain of unfulfilled desire.<sup>23</sup>

As the account stands, it will appear that whereas the pain associated with unfulfilled appetitive desire is a ‘bother’ in the sense described earlier, the pain associated with unfulfilled intellectual desire is a ‘disturbance’. After all, we said that disturbance will arise from “a perceived injury to one’s flourishing owing to the non-evident judgment that something is genuinely good (and missing),” which, as the account has been given to now, is the situation when an intellectual desire goes unsatisfied.

But a bit more needs to be said (admittedly going beyond Aristotle). There are two ways that a thing may be (judged to be) a good, namely, as something *required* for flourishing (a ‘requisite’), or as something that would contribute to flourishing (a ‘perquisite’). Both requisites and perquisites (i.e., judgments of them as such) are liable to be thought good—Aristotle assumes that we all wish to flourish (though we might disagree about what constitutes flourishing), and therefore we are all disposed to think the things that (we take to) contribute to flourishing as good, and thereby to find them desirable. However, while the absence of a requisite will indeed hinder flourishing, and may therefore generate disturbance,<sup>24</sup> flourishing need not be hindered by the absence of a perquisite—the fact that one lacks a good that *can* contribute to flourishing does not imply that one is failing to flourish.

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<sup>23</sup> Although there is no space, here, to spell out the differences, the Aristotelian account contrasts in important ways from the frequently encountered contemporary account of desire as a ‘propositional attitude’ (Brewer 2006).

<sup>24</sup> One might argue that this kind of disturbance, too, must be avoided, and if it can be avoided by an appropriate possession of requisites, so much the better. But must it be avoided at all costs (by never judging anything to be a requisite in the first place)? Perhaps not. Perhaps, much as bodily pain can be an inducement to self-improvement, the ‘psychic pain’ of disturbance may also sometimes serve a good purpose.

One might object that unfulfillment of a desire for perquisites is also a harm to flourishing inasmuch as one would be *better off* (flourish to a greater degree) with them than without them. If there were no limitations on the acquisition of perquisites, or if, at least, one could order them so that for any two perquisites, we could say which is better, then we might suppose that disturbance will arise from any failure to maximize perquisites (to get all of them, if possible, or the best combination of them if they can at least be ordered),<sup>25</sup> inasmuch as in such a case, one's flourishing is in some way diminished.

But what if goods can be both incompatible (roughly, one cannot have all of them) and incommensurable (roughly, there is no measure that generates a total order on them)? Neither of these claims can be defended here,<sup>26</sup> but if they are true (as I think they are), then the absence of a perquisite need not inevitably involve a *damage* to one's flourishing. There are just different ways of flourishing, based on different constellations of goods. Maybe some of them are needed (requisites), but there is no best constellation overall, just different ones. Hence, appreciating certain goods as perquisite rather than requisite, one may be *pleased* when the good is obtained but (while perhaps regretful in some manner) not necessarily *disturbed* when the good appears to be absent or lost.

That attitude (towards the good of truth) is the attitude of intellectual humility, as described above. Of course, none of the preceding implies that one *ought* to take truth as a good, and it is not the point, here, to make any such claim. The point, instead, is to illustrate how it might be possible to take truth to be a good, to desire it genuinely, but not to be *disturbed*—not to think that one's life is somehow going badly—if it turns out (as it so often does) to be elusive.

Realizing this possibility requires developing a character that can lead one to think of truth as a perquisite good (perhaps only in some contexts, or regarding certain matters), and more generally to make judgments about goods that will work out in the context of one's life, that will enable one to flourish (however flourishing might look for different people). It is an ongoing project, and it can be a struggle, not least because of the severe honesty with oneself that it requires, not to mention the sometimes severe difficulty of managing or reforming one's desires. It is the project, really, of defining oneself as a human being, and for that reason, the struggle is worth it.

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<sup>25</sup> More complicated stories could be told about maximizing some measure of 'utilities' applied to perquisites. No such story makes sense if what follows is correct.

<sup>26</sup> There is a massive literature on the matter in both philosophy and social science. (Chang 1998) is an entry-point.

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## Integrity statement

The author certifies that this article is the author's original work, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.

## Conflict of Interest statement

The author certifies that the presentation and interpretation of the material in this article have not been influenced for the sake of the benefit of any competing financial or personal interests.

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