HOW IS PEREBOOM'S "FREE WILL SKEPTICISM" A FORM OF SKEPTICISM?[1]

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1. Introduction

In his *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life* (2014), Derk Pereboom calls his view on free will a form of "free will skepticism". Consider, for example (my emphases): "I call the resulting variety of *skepticism about free will* [that I endorse] 'hard incompatibilism'" (p. 4); "Unlike the libertarian and compatibilist positions, *free will skepticism* does not face objections that challenge the position's internal coherence" (p. 104); "One might think that *free will skepticism* would due to its conception of agency instill in us an attitude of resignation…" (p. 193). What Pereboom means by "free will" - or, more precisely, the kind of thing labeled "free will" he is concerned with - is the "strongest sort of control in action required for a core sense of moral responsibility" (Pereboom 2014)[2]. Famously, Pereboom denies that we have rational grounds to believe that such control exists, and (importantly) maintains that we have rational grounds to believe that it does *not* exist.

Instead of focusing on the truth of Pereboom's contentions on free will, the purpose of this paper is rather that of understanding what he means by "skepticism". This question highlights an important terminological oddity that runs somewhat unchecked[3] in the contemporary philosophical literature: "skepticism" seems to sometimes refer to theories that deny the possibility of knowledge, sometimes to the non-existence of an object, and it is not clear how such readings of the term might be related to one another.

The structure of this paper will be as follows: in Section 2, I offer a tentative taxonomy of the different meanings of "skepticism" in contemporary theoretical philosophy. In Section 3, I show why

[1] Thanks to EJ Coffman, Georgi Gardiner, David Palmer, and the "Board of Certified Epistemologists" Facebook group for helpful comments and suggestions.

[2] See also Pereboom (1995; 2001, pp. 6, 59, 127). In his (2014), he also specifies that (1) the agent must be the "source" of the action in a sufficiently robust way, and (2) the agent must deserve praise/blame for the action in question (basic desert) if they are able to understand the moral goodness/badness of the action (Introduction).

[3] The only contemporary publication I am aware of that explicitly acknowledges it is Guillon (2023).

Pereboom's account of free will seems to not accord with any of the suggested readings, leaving the label he uses for his theory unexplained. In Section 4, I apply Chalmers' (2011) "Method of Elimination" for verbal disputes to "skepticism". The result will suggest that, while this is surely in part a *merely* verbal dispute, it is also a dispute over the *proper* use of words within a linguistic community. I conclude by presenting a few reasons in favor of Pereboom's terminological choice, and a few reasons against it. The case study will have the more general upshot of providing a clearer, if complex, picture of what we mean when we employ the term "skepticism".

2. A taxonomy for "skepticism"

Before analyzing what Pereboom may mean by "free will skepticism", we need a minimal taxonomy of what the wider philosophical literature means by "skepticism". While for centuries philosophers have used the term to express an epistemic status such that it is impossible for the epistemic agent to attain knowledge of a certain kind[4], since the latter half of the 20th century analytic philosophers started using the term in a looser sense that encompasses both doubt towards a certain area of inquiry[5], and the non-existence of the object of inquiry[6].

For our purposes, then, it will be first of all useful to distinguish what I will label "Epistemic Skepticism" (ES) from what I will label "Metaphysical Skepticism" (MS). ES is the traditional claim that, given a certain field of inquiry *I*, it is *impossible* (and not just "very hard", as I will argue later) for the epistemic agent to access information about *I* because it is impossible to attain sufficient justification for any belief about *I*. MS represents the more recent sense of "skepticism", as the non-existence of facts that pertain to *I*. Applying this distinction to the free will debate, ES about free will claims that it is impossible for us to be justified in believing that free will exists; MS about free will claims that free will does not exist.

[4] See, for instance, Berkeley (1713, First Dialogue) and Kant (1787, A388).
[5] See, for instance, Susanna Rinard's (2018; 2021).
[6] See, for instance, how the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines "moral skepticism" (Sinnott-Armstrong 2019) and "skepticism about moral responsibility" (Caruso 2018).

For brevity, I will bracket here distinctions between propositional knowledge (e.g., S knows that free will exists), knowledge by acquaintance (e.g., S is familiar with free will; they know what it is like to have free will) and understanding (e.g., S *understands* what free will consists in; for instance, by taking a course on free will in college). With appropriate minor tweaks, all three kinds of knowledge should be compatible with my taxonomy and, from what I can tell, nothing rests on this distinction.

Strikingly, the literature in epistemology assumes ES as the standard usage, while the literature in metaphysics assumes MS as the standard usage. In fact, while anecdotal, I found it striking (and this is in part the reason why I became interested in this general question) to note in conversations with philosophers who mainly work in epistemology that they find the MS reading odd (Georgi Gardiner, EJ Coffman) or even downright mistaken (Paolo Spinicci), while philosophers who mainly work in metaphysics find the ES reading odd (David Palmer) or outdated (Andrea Guardo).

I will now try to suggest that the two understandings of the term can be reduced to a common one. I suggest that ES and MS can be reduced to the same fundamental, and characteristically skeptical, claim: both ES and MS claim that knowledge in the field of inquiry *I* is impossible.

To see this, consider the familiar necessary conditions for the fact that *S knows that p*:

a) *S believes that p*

b) *There is sufficient epistemic support in favor of p*

c) *P is true*

While, after Gettier (1963), some philosophers have rejected these conditions as *both necessary and sufficient*, most contemporary epistemologists accept them as *necessary* while looking for the further requisite for a full definition of knowledge. For our purposes, all we need is for the conditions to be necessary. I use the more neutral term “epistemic support” instead of the familiar “justification” due to the latter’s controversial nature.

Since the conditions are necessary, denying one amounts to denying knowledge. But, notice, it is one thing to deny knowledge, but another to deny the *possibility* of knowledge. Accordingly, then, the traditional conditions for the possibility of knowledge are:

d) *It is possible for S to believe that p*

e) *There can be sufficient epistemic support in favor of p*

f) *It is possible for p to be true*

We now have what it takes to show that both ES and MS are committed to the same claim: it is impossible to attain knowledge in the field of inquiry *I*. ES reaches this claim by denying (e); MS reaches the same conclusion by denying (f). One might argue that a third kind of skepticism would result from denying (d)[7]. This seems correct. Take, for instance, McGinn's (1989) claim that it is probably true that the mind is metaphysically reducible to the body (f); nevertheless, it is simply impossible for a human *mind* to not find this irremediably mysterious: "it is something about the tracks of our thought that prevents us from achieving a science that relates consciousness to its physical basis: the enemy lies within the gate". As usual in philosophy, the plausibility of this claim rests on our further philosophical understanding of the concepts adopted in the claim. The view is at least intelligible if we take *belief* to be, on a widespread theory associated with Ramsey (1927), a disposition to act on a certain proposition[8].

Plausible or not, this attitude towards the mind-body problem seems to suggest a form of skepticism due to our inability to *believe* that the mind is nothing but the brain, despite there being good evidence in favor of the fact that the mind is nothing but the brain: McGinn allows for (e) and (f), but denies (d). Call this view, after McGinn's, "Mysterianism".

Before we move on, finally, it is crucial to stress that I remained intentionally silent about the *modality* of impossibility in skeptical claims. For each variation, one can be a stronger skeptic or a

[7] Thanks to David Palmer for suggesting this point.
[8] See Hoek (2022) for a new sophisticated account along the same lines.

weaker one depending on the modal value of "impossible". For instance, two Epistemic Skeptics can disagree on the nature of their skepticism because one claims that it is *logically* impossible to attain sufficient epistemic support to know that p, while the other claims that it is *metaphysically* impossible to do so. Later, I will try to apply these considerations to Pereboom's theory in an attempt to find the skepticism in his "free will skepticism"; but, first, let us see why his "skepticism" does not accord with any of the views I delineated so far.

3. Skepticisms and free will

I have put forth three distinct understandings of "skepticism" – Epistemic Skepticism, Metaphysical Skepticism, and Mysterianism – and suggested that they all underlie the same conclusion about knowledge of a given field of inquiry *I*: that it is impossible to have knowledge of *I*. We will now look at each option in turn, provide an existing example of its application to the free will debate, and show why Pereboom's theory does not accord with any of them.

Epistemic Skepticism about free will claims that it is impossible to have sufficient epistemic support to know whether we have free will. The best example of this can be found in Kearns (2015). Kearns offers a useful taxonomy of a family of epistemic attitudes towards free will that he labels "free will agnosticism". What is crucial for our purposes here is that all versions of free will agnosticism are *epistemic* claims: following Kearns, a free will agnostic is someone who denies that *S* can obtain sufficient justification to rationally believe that we have free will. Kearns' claim has nothing to do with the existence of free will *per se*: the problem, Kearns's argument goes, is that we do not have sufficient *evidence* in the sciences to know that action determinism is false *and* we do not have sufficient arguments in philosophy to know that incompatibilism is false. These two facts, together, make it impossible for us to know whether free will exists or not.

While Kearns's Free Will Agnosticism and what we labeled "Free Will Epistemic Skepticism" clearly have a lot in common, Kearns's definition of agnosticism is too lax to be *identified* with the latter. Kearns accepts as "agnostic" someone who claims that "*Almost* no one knows whether or not normally

functioning adult humans have free will" ("Very Weak Free Will Agnosticism"). This is unacceptable for an epistemic skeptic: if only a few experts have the epistemic support necessary to *know* that free will exists, then there is no interesting sense in which it is *impossible* to have sufficient epistemic support to know whether free will exists. A non-interesting sense could be: "It is impossible, in normal conditions, for someone who did not study/reflect enough to have enough epistemic support to know that free will exists"; it is not interesting in our context because it does not exclude the possibility that such knowledge be attained by some actual epistemic agents.

As we will see later, this formulation is not strong enough to count as "skeptical": most properly modest epistemic agents - except for Mooreans, though one might argue that Mooreans are not properly modest epistemic agents for this very reason[9] - will agree that they do not know if free will exists when they start inquiring on the topic, and we would hardly call them "agnostic" just because they *momentarily* suspend judgment. So, a more useful reading of "free will agnosticism", which, in fact, is Kearns's focus in his paper, is one where the epistemic agent argues that *humanity, as things stand*, does not have sufficient epistemic support to know whether we have free will or not.

But Kearns's stronger forms of agnosticism (at least the ones he labels "Strong" and "Very Strong" Free Will Agnosticism) seem to fit ES even better: in such cases, it is respectively "practically" or "metaphysically" impossible to know whether we have free will or not.

I will now argue that Pereboom's "free will skepticism" cannot count as a form of epistemic skepticism. The entire point of Pereboom's theory is to suggest that we *do* have sufficient epistemic support *against* the idea that free will is real: for instance, he claims that the fact that a free agent might freely follow the laws of nature without a significant divergence from what would occur without the free agent would be an unbelievably wild coincidence (2001, Chap.3). No other construal of free will fares significantly better, on his account; so, the evidence is not neutral, for Pereboom: it is clearly in favor of free will anti-realism. To sum up: whatever the overlapping between free will

[9] For a forceful attack on Moorean intuitionism in philosophy, see Rinard (2013).

agnostics and free will epistemic skeptics may be, both claim that, if we are rational, we should suspend judgment over the existence of free will; Pereboom argues, however, that we should not suspend judgment, but we should *deny* that free will exists.

Secondly, and maybe somewhat surprisingly, we should say that Pereboom does *not* support the Metaphysical claim, at least in the way I framed it[10]. Remember I have suggested that Metaphysical Skepticism, if it is to have any terminological significance, must claim that free will *cannot* exist. For instance, Strawson (2003), as an *impossibilist* about free will, can make such a claim. But Pereboom does not think that free will is impossible: he claims that, at present, we have good reason to believe we lack free will. For example, after considering and rejecting the existence of free will as a power that overrides the laws of nature, he notes[11]: "Nothing we've said conclusively rules out the ultimate success of the overriding strategy. Our knowledge of neurophysiology is limited, and we do not even approach a complete understanding of neurophysiological structures. Thus there remains the epistemic possibility [that it exists]". He then, even more clearly, concludes: "In my view, this approach is the best one for libertarians to pursue. But *at this point*, we have no evidence that its claims are true" (my emphasis). In his (2014) updated theory, Pereboom does state that he now sees agent-causation (the one version of libertarian free will he used to find perfectly coherent) as harder to defend even on logical grounds. But "these concerns don't go as far as to definitely establish its incoherence" (p. 6).

Finally, we seem able to say that Pereboom is not a mysterian about free will, at least *as far as* his skepticism is concerned. John Searle[12] and Peter van Inwagen[13] are famous, and quite different, examples of self-proclaimed mysterians about free will. Both philosophers claim a parallel with McGinn's attitude towards the mind: there may well be good evidence and arguments against free will, but it seems simply impossible for human agents to believe we do not have free will, especially

[10] In the last section we will consider a weaker alternative.
[11] Pereboom (2001), p. 86.
[12] "If I become convinced that free will is an illusion, then I'm still stuck with the fact that I have to act on the presupposition of free will" *Closer to Truth* (2020). See also Searle (2001).
[13] Consider especially his (2000) article, eloquently titled "Free Will Remains a Mystery", and his (2004a) general assessment of his own views on free will. The classic source for his theory of free will is his (1983).

when faced with a decision. A crucial difference between Searle's and van Inwagen's proposals is that Searle argues that *libertarianism* (that is, freedom *and* indeterminism) must be presupposed when facing a decision, while van Inwagen argues that *free will* must be presupposed. Coffman & Warfield (2005) argue that this makes Searle's proposal significantly less plausible: while it seems more likely that ordinary people must presuppose some kind of freedom when they make a choice, it seems more difficult to suggest that the layperson who never even *considered* whether the world is predetermined or not *must subjectively* presuppose an indeterministic picture of the world in order to make a choice. Van Inwagen differs from Searle in his methodological commitments as well. He understands free will as a Moorean fact: no philosophical argument could ever be stronger than his confidence in the existence of free will, therefore he would be willing to "flip-flop"[14] between his commitment to incompatibilism and a denial of it, depending on scientific findings about the fundamental nature of the physical world (specifically, its determinacy or indeterminacy).

I have serious doubts that Van Inwagen's commitment really is of the mysterian kind, despite his explicit claim that free will is a "McGinn-style philosophical mystery" (2004a, p. 224). The reason for this is that Van Inwagen does not locate the "mystery" at the level of our cognitive limitations that seem to "force" us into believing that the mind is something more than simply brain processes (as in McGinn's case) or that we are able to do otherwise (as in Searle's case); rather, Van Inwagen is convinced that we *do* have an ability to do otherwise and that it is sufficient to provide grounds for moral responsibility, but he also admits that it seems impossible for free will to be compatible with determinism as far as he can tell, and he finds it irremediably mysterious how free will, *which he is nevertheless staunchly committed to*, can arise from indeterminacy: "I must choose between the puzzling and the inconceivable. I choose the puzzling." (1983, p. 150).

Incidentally, notice that a broader understanding of Van Inwagen's views make it into a highly idiosyncratic one. First, he seems to endorse a kind of general metaphilosophical skepticism grounded in the fact that different people will find different commitments to be non-negotiable (Van Inwagen

[14] For a good argument against the epistemic permissibility of such flip-flopping, see Fischer (2016); for a good argument in defense of it, see Bailey & Seymour (2021).

2004b); second, and maybe more importantly, his Mooreanism about free will seems in direct methodological contrast with his eliminativism about ordinary objects: he is a particularist when it comes to free will, but a methodist when it comes to material objects ontology. For a favorable position on the Moorean commitment, see Kelly (2005; 2008); for an unfavorable position, see Rinard (2013). For Van Inwagen's eliminativism about ordinary objects, see, among others, Van Inwagen (1981; 1990) and, for criticism, Merricks (ms). For an overview of the discussion on ordinary objects, see Korman (2020).

For our purposes, then, we may set Van Inwagen to the side, and see if Pereboom is a mysterian in the proper "McGinn-style" sense of the term.

Interestingly, Pereboom agrees with Searle that "as a matter of psychological fact it would be difficult for us to abandon every aspect of this [i.e., free will libertarianism] view"[15]. So, maybe, Pereboom's skepticism is in line with mysterianism after all. I claim that Pereboom cannot be a (coherent) mysterian, and that, even if he considered himself one, that would not be what he means by "skepticism".

First, Pereboom cannot be a coherent mysterian because a large part of his view on free will consists in suggesting that we can and ought to learn to live without the concept of free will (Pereboom 2001, Chaps. 5-7; 2014, Chaps. 5-8). So, at least if we accept the common conception of belief I suggested above, Pereboom cannot make the strong claim that McGinn makes about the mind and that Searle makes about free will. If, in fact, belief is a disposition to act on a certain proposition, and Pereboom invites us to act on the proposition "free will does not exist", then he cannot be holding the mysterian position that we cannot believe that free will does not exist.

Moreover, and more crucially for our intents here, even if he *was* a mysterian about free will, this clearly is not what he *means* by "free will skepticism": the theory he associates with this label is that free will does not exist, not that we cannot approach the question without presupposing free will.

[15] (2001), p. 130.

In sum, Pereboom *cannot* be associated with any of the senses of "skepticism" we have picked out so far. Let us now discuss a final alternative, and its plausibility.

4. A verbal dispute and a substantial dispute

So far, we have seen what Pereboom's skepticism cannot be. But Pereboom calls his view "Free will skepticism": so, while I do not commit myself to a globally deflationary attitude towards philosophical disagreement as always explainable in terms of linguistic confusion - pace Wittgenstein (1953) - it seems dutifully charitable to Pereboom to suspect that there is a reasonable sense of "skepticism" that captures his view. Even if there is not, after all, charitability requires that we imagine, as a working hypothesis, that Pereboom had a successful view in mind which he captured with an improper expression. Compare: theists sometimes claim they are "idealists" because they maintain that everything exists as grounded in God's mind. Assume that this is not the best way to understand idealism for a theist: constructivism seems to capture the idea better. Of course, it doesn't follow from this that the theists are wrong about the dependence of reality on the mind of God. Or, consider: Rea (2002) brings about an attack on what he calls "philosophical naturalism" and that he defines as a "research program wherein one treats the methods of science and those methods alone as basic sources of evidence" (p. 16). In his review, Cross (2003) sees this as an implausible definition of "naturalism": what Rea's definition captures is, on Cross's view, a strong form of empiricism. But Cross agrees that from this it does not follow, again, that Rea's attack on *whatever he was actually talking about*, radical empiricism, fails. In a similar vein, identifying the potential improper use of "skepticism" would help everyone appreciate Pereboom's view more fully.

In order to find a common ground with Pereboom, then, it is important to understand how much this dispute is merely verbal and how much any substantive disagreement hinges on it. This task may seem to be made more difficult by the fact that there are widespread concerns about the substantiality of many disagreements in epistemology, metaphysics, and in the free will debate[16]. Going forward, I

[16] On verbal disagreement in metaphysics, see Chalmers, Manley & Wasserman (2009). In epistemology, see Sosa (2010, 2013); Cohen (1995); Alston (2005); Greco (2015). In the free will debate, see Chalmers (2011); Schulte (2014); May (2014). Ballantyne (2016) presents a challenge to the view that mere verbal disagreement is widespread in philosophy.

will assume, with much of the literature, that most philosophical disputes are, indeed, *partially* verbal, but also that there must be a substantial disagreement somewhere down the line: in fact, my analysis might suggest that sometimes a philosophical dispute boils down to a *substantial disagreement over the proper use of words* for the purposes of a certain linguistic community.

David Chalmers (2011) suggests that a powerful strategy to determine if a dispute is *merely* verbal is by use of what he labels "Method of Elimination": "the key idea is that one eliminates use of the key term, and one attempts to determine whether any substantive dispute remains". So, we should reformulate Pereboom's claim without employing "skepticism" and see if any substantive disagreement remains with other forms of skepticism about free will or, at least, if the theories turn out to be compatible with one another.

As hinted at in Section 3, Pereboom's free will "skepticism" amounts to a "low credence" epistemic attitude towards the existence of free will: given the available evidence, we should have low confidence in the belief that free will exists, and high confidence in the belief that it does not. Interestingly, the most widespread meaning of the word "skepticism" accords with this idea: "skepticism" as used by ordinary English speakers. Think, for instance, of the following ordinary language expression: "I am skeptical that the relationship will survive the summer". Here, the speaker is not conveying any of the high-brow meanings of "skepticism" we have identified: they are simply expressing low credence (and, importantly, not impartial suspension of belief as in ES) in the proposition "the relationship will survive the summer"[17].

Call the doxastic attitude exemplified above, and the associated normative claim, "OL-skepticism" (for "Ordinary Language"). One may take issue with my use of a same label for a doxastic attitude and its associated normative claim. Notice that this usage follows a standard linguistic practice. For example, an epistemic agent is an external world skeptic if they have the doxastic attitude of suspending judgment on the nature of the external world, but they are also called an external world skeptic if they endorse the normative claim that they (and, presumably, everybody else) ought to

[17] Thanks to Georgi Gardiner for suggesting this point.

suspend judgment on the nature of the external world. Both conditions are independently sufficient for someone to be an external world skeptic, but, interestingly, neither seems necessary on its own. Further work on the language of philosophy could help us see if this piece of terminological orthodoxy is also worrisome.

Interestingly, OL-skepticism is *still* compatible with the overarching claim that "it is impossible to know that free will exists", though in a modally weaker sense than those we have seen so far: if we have good reason to believe that free will does not exist in the actual world, then we have good reason to believe that *it is impossible to know* that free will exists in the actual world.

Thus, it seems that we have found a plausible candidate to eliminate "skepticism": Pereboom claims that we have good reasons to have low confidence in our having free will, while Strawson (for instance) thinks it impossible for us to know that free will exists, because free will itself is impossible.

Was our question easily solved by appeal to ordinary language? Is there still a substantial disagreement here? That remains unclear. Something that may still bug the traditional skeptic is that Pereboom's use of the word is improper *because* it is confusing or useless. As Chalmers correctly points out, not all debates *about words* are *merely verbal disputes*: while, of course, we may arbitrarily stipulate that "skepticism" means "low credence", the substantive question is whether it makes sense to use the word in this way in our linguistic community.

To see its merits, compare Chalmers's to a much worse account of verbal disagreement in philosophy: van Inwagen's (2018). Van Inwagen thinks that the mere fact that a term is a formal term makes any debate over the proper use of the term meaningless. This is because, in the case of words that have a common use in natural language, we can appeal to cases to show that a certain account of the proper use of the word is correct or not; but this is obviously impossible if the word is a term of art, like "realism" (p. 2). What van Inwagen fails to consider is that words and concepts exist in the context of other words and concepts, and so any word and any concept can be scrutinized under a pragmatic lens: Is using this word helpful? Does it clarify the point of a debate? It may be difficult to establish the answer to these questions, but this worry does not by itself make all debates about words

pointless. In fact, even the use of words that are commonplace in natural language could, in principle, be revised for practical purposes: so, even his appeal to use of cases in discussions of "knowledge", or "cause" is, I believe, shortsighted.

It may also not be obvious that the linguistic community *English Speakers* and the linguistic community *Academic Philosophers* would benefit from the same terminology in the same way. For instance, much of the technical terminology we find clarificatory in philosophical works may not just *sound* but *be* too complicated and pedantic when ordering food at a restaurant, *even for philosophers themselves*. For our purposes here, we will focus on the aptness of Pereboom's terminology *as a formal label* for his philosophical theory; for all we say here, the ordinary language use of "skeptical" *as used in ordinary language contexts*, is fine as it is.

A potential reason to accept Pereboom's OL-skepticism is, simply, that it accords with ordinary language. It is a virtue of formal terminology when it is easily accessible and understandable for someone who is not trained in the area of inquiry and that needs to rely on ordinary language to understand what they are reading.

Another *prima facie* good reason to accept it, some may argue[18], is that while the traditional reading excludes OL-skepticism as a form of skepticism, OL-skepticism allows for the traditional reading as a particularly strong form of skepticism, or at least as a subset of epistemic options open to an OL-skeptic. There is something true about this claim, but it needs some unpacking. In particular, it is not obvious that all the technical readings of skepticism I presented in Section 2 are compatible with such a claim.

For starters, Epistemic Skepticism is *not* a more specific form of OL-skepticism. As we said, OL-skepticism is the claim that we (should) have low credence towards *p*. Epistemic Skepticism, as I framed it, is the claim that it is impossible to gain epistemic justification to know that *p*. While the two claims are compatible, one can be an Epistemic Skeptic without being an OL-skeptic: for instance, in cases where one remains completely neutral between *p* and ~*p*, because, they claim, it is

[18] Thanks to Fredrik Haraldsen and Kyle Dickey for pushing this line of defense.

impossible to justify one's belief one way or the other. Formally, while OL-skepticism requires <50% credence, Epistemic Skepticism is compatible with holding an exact 50% credence in accord with one's justification[19].

Metaphysical Skepticism, the view that the object of inquiry *cannot* exist, counts as an especially strong form of OL-skepticism. This should be clear: if we are claiming that free will cannot exist, and thus we cannot know that it exists, we seem *a fortiori* compelled by rationality to claim low (more specifically, zero) credence in its existence. So, on this reading, OL-skepticism may present a theoretical advantage.

Finally, Mysterianism about p is the claim that, despite the evidence, we cannot possibly bring ourselves to believe that $\sim p$. This also seems compatible with OL-skepticism. If I could not bring myself to believe that the relationship will survive the summer, then, *a fortiori*, I will inevitably have low (zero) credence in that proposition. So, two out of the three "stronger" skeptical views can be accommodated inside the broader family of OL-skepticism.

So, we have seen that OL-skepticism accords with ordinary language, and that it can accommodate the two more modern understandings of "skepticism" in the philosophical literature. While these may seem to some compelling reasons to accept Pereboom's terminology as appropriate, there are competing reasons to remain uncertain about the proper verdict.

A reason to reject this idea is that semantic inclusivity is not always a positive outcome. In fact, one might argue that specialist terminology in any field of research can sound obscure and highly technical precisely because different words try to pick out nuanced *differences* in views. Reducing "skepticism" to "low credence" puts very different ideas on the same level. Consider, for example, the use of "fish" in ordinary language. If someone at a restaurant chose to eat a steak instead of lobster because they "don't like fish", it would be pedantic to point out that, strictly speaking, a lobster is a crustacean: we know what they mean and, for the contextual purposes, "fish" works well enough. But,

[19] One may want to claim that Epistemic Skepticism *requires* exactly 50% credence. I do not commit to this claim because it seems to me to require an internalist view of justification. Internalists may commit to the stronger claim that OL-skepticism and Epistemic Skepticism are incompatible on such grounds.

of course, if a marine biologist published a book where they call lobsters "fish" (and they do not have a revolutionary theory as to why we ought to consider lobsters fish instead of crustaceans), the expert community would react negatively, because in this context terminological precision is required. Pereboom's use of "skepticism" may be an analogue of this scenario.

To see why, consider again Kearns' free will agnosticism. While Kearns is not fully explicit about this, it seems useful to distinguish a free will agnostic from someone who simply does not think they currently have sufficient evidence to believe there is free will. Say a first-year philosophy student is taking a course on free will in college. As the student discovers and explores various options, they seem laudable if they accept that, as things stand, they do not have gathered enough data and have not reflected enough to reach a conclusion. But it seems clear that we should not call the student an agnostic: to be an agnostic about a certain field of inquiry, there need be some more generality to the lack of access to the truth. In other words, simply believing *one* does not have enough data to reach a conclusion *right now* seems insufficient to label them "agnostic". As we mentioned earlier, a plausible requirement, which Kearns calls "Weak Free Will Agnosticism", is that *humanity*, *at present*, does not have what it takes to know whether we have free will or not.

Another prominent use of "agnosticism" in the literature on free will is that of Al Mele (2005). Mele endorses "agnostic autonomism", the view that - unlike Kearns' - claims that agents are autonomous (or, in the standard terminology, "have free will") but remains silent on the dispute between libertarians and compatibilists. Unlike Kearns, Mele is not explicit about the scope of his agnosticism. Notice also that, upon scrutiny, Mele's view collapses into Kearns' stronger free will agnosticism.

Mele asks us to consider four propositions:

a. Some human beings are autonomous, and determinism is compatible with autonomy (compatibilist belief in autonomy).

b. Some human beings are autonomous, and determinism is incompatible with autonomy (libertarianism).

c. Either a or b (agnostic autonomism).

d. No human beings are autonomous (nonautonomism).

At this point, he goes on to argue that (c) is more likely to be true than either (a) or (b), which is fair enough since they are its disjuncts and they are each nontrivial if true. But then he says: "[N]onautonomism, at best, fares no better than a and no better than b. […] If that is right, then since c has a higher probability than each of a and b, c has a higher probability than d: agnostic autonomism beats nonautonomism!". While Mele's reasoning is valid, it gives no reason to favor autonomism over nonautonomism, because his view simply amounts to the basic logical point that, for any three propositions {a, b, d} with equal epistemic probability, a disjunction with two of the three propositions as its disjuncts is more likely to be true than the third proposition. If, as Mele says, (d) simply fares "no better" than (a) or (b), then the same conclusion, *mutatis mutandis*, could be reached about the disjuction (a)∨(d) or the disjunction (b)∨(d). So, unless we are presented with a successful positive argument against the plausibility of (d) compared to (a) or (b), all options have the same epistemic probability. But if we have an independent argument for the implausibility of (d) compared to (a) or (b), then the argument Mele presents here serves no purpose.

So, should we describe the first-year college student who suspends judgment on free will as a "free will skeptic"? Again, as in the case of "agnosticism"[20], it seems implausible that "skepticism" should pick out just any epistemic attitude that gives low credence to a proposition about free will: if that was the case, then the undergraduate student in my example would be a skeptic only because they show plausible epistemic modesty in a field of inquiry they know little about. Moreover, this use of the term would produce the following implausible result: that *any* rational inquirer must be a skeptic at first. This is *not* what *anyone* means by "skepticism"[21].

[20] Yet *another* potential topic for further inquiry in philosophical terminology concerns, as the reader may have noticed in reading this paper, the relationship between "agnosticism" and "skepticism". While I suspect that "skepticism" must be stronger than "agnosticism", I remain silent on how exactly to spell out the difference.
[21] I can only think of one prominent (apparent) exception: Johann Friedrick Herbart's claim that all philosophy amateurs should be skeptics and all skeptics should be philosophy amateurs (Beiser 2022, Chap. 9). But Herbart meant that a student shows philosophical *talent* if they submit to skepticism at first (and reject it later on), not that anyone who momentarily suspends judgment on any topic counts as a skeptic.

5. Conclusion

I have offered a taxonomy of plausible readings of what the philosophical literature means by "skepticism", and we have tried to see if Derk Pereboom's "free will skepticism" accords with any of them. The verdict was that it does not, and this showed a potential flaw in the use of the word "skepticism" by Pereboom and other metaphysicians who may be too quick to label a theory skeptical just because it recommends low credence in a certain proposition most people take to be true.

We have then considered whether anything substantial rests on this dispute, and concluded that, while there surely is a merely verbal, and, as such, arbitrary, component to the quarrel, there is an underlying substantial question as to the *appropriateness* of using the label in this way in the philosophical debate. We presented reasons to accept Pereboom's terminology, and reasons to reject it: Pereboom's "skepticism" is in line with ordinary language, and it is more inclusive than the traditional reading; on the other hand, its inclusiveness may make it less useful when it comes to distinguishing competing theories.

The case study I focused my article on is surely not alone in its problematic use of the term "skepticism". As a brief example, take the expression "skepticism about God's existence"[22]. I leave it to further inquiries to analyze the usage of this expression in academic works; while not an expert in the literature on God's existence, from what I can tell, it is less than fully clear what academic philosophers mean by that expression and they *definitely* do not all mean the same thing[23]. Even if

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[22] Thanks to EJ Coffman for pushing me on this point.

[23] Here are a handful of examples. Byerly (2022, p.65) suggests that some find there to be "particular moral reasons that favor erring on the side of *skepticism regarding God's existence*" (my emphasis). But in the passage it is unclear whether Byerly is using "skepticism" in the Ordinary Language sense or in the Metaphysical sense: his opponent in the passage may be either arguing that we should *have low credence* in God's existence and act instead of waiting for Their help (which we have *little evidence for*), or that we should *assume God does not exist* and act instead of waiting for (what the agent in question takes to be) a non-existent being's help.

Penelhum (1983) discusses what he labels "skeptical fideism": the view that faith is strengthened by the skeptical problem. By "the skeptical problem" and by "skeptical" in "skeptical fideism", Penelhum definitely refers to Epistemic Skepticism: "[it is the view that] reason cannot give us truth or assurance outside the sphere of faith any more than within it". On the other hand, the very logic behind fideism seems to imply a sort of Mysterianism regarding God, especially if the fideist agrees that some of the arguments against the existence of God seem rationally compelling.

Pereboom could appeal to such precedent, however, I do not think that this, by itself, has any force to move the needle in favor of such terminology, unlike the other considerations I set forth. More generally, I would suggest caution when using the expression "skepticism" in academic contexts and make a plea for higher explicit clarity in what authors mean by it.

On top of these, consider the important and somewhat popular view labelled "skeptical theism", namely, the view that God exists but we *cannot understand* Their decision-making. This instance of "skepticism" sounds a lot more like what I have labelled "Epistemic Skepticism" regarding God's plan (their view can be expressed as "we cannot know what God's plan is"), rather than low confidence in God's or Their plan's existence.

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