A NEW ARGUMENT FOR DISTINGUISHING
REJECTION AND DENIAL

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Abstract

According to a common philosophical methodology, philosophical debates about some topic *F* should begin with clarifying what *F*s are before addressing more substantive questions including the question of whether *F*s actually exist or are possible. This paper discusses a challenge to this common methodological assumption with epistemological debates including those about closure, KK, infallibilism and internalism as the primary case study. On the one hand, these debates are supposed to be about whether some epistemic principle is true or false; I call this assumption *Bipolarity*. On the other hand, denying an epistemic principle is supposed to entail neither the truth nor the falsity of scepticism; I call this assumption *Neutrality*. These two assumption cannot both be true: If scepticism is true, i. e. knowledge (of some target class) is impossible, it is vacuously true that all cases of knowledge (of the target class) are closed, infallible, etc. Hence, the falsity of any epistemic principle entails the falsity of scepticism. This result is puzzling because it rules out rejecting closure, infallibilism, etc. independently of rejecting scepticism. To solve this puzzle I propose giving up Bipolarity by distinguishing between rejection and denial.

Keywords: rejection – denial – necessary conditions – philosophical methodology – scepticism

This paper discusses a rarely, if ever, acknowledged puzzle about philosophical debates about necessary conditions. It also proposes a solution to it that requires distinguishing two ways of saying "no" to a proposed necessary condition, rejection and denial. In section 1 I present the puzzle with epistemological debates as the primary case study. In section 2 I defend the puzzle as being a genuine one by explaining how the puzzle generalises and why the assumptions that generate it are plausible. In section 3 I sketch my preferred solution.

1. A puzzle about epistemological debates

On a common view of many epistemological debates, one party asserts an epistemic principle and the other party denies it, i. e., asserts its negation. Examples of such principles are closure, KK, infallibilism, internalism and

many more. A second common assumption is that rejecting an epistemic principle entails neither scepticism nor anti-scepticism. All of the principles mentioned are sometimes accused of leading to scepticism, but rejecting one of them should be neutral with respect to scepticism: One can become committed to scepticism or anti-scepticism by *accepting* an epistemic principle, but not by *denying* one, or so it seems. To sum up, the common view consists of two claims:

Bipolarity: In a debate about an epistemic principle the proponents assert it and the opponents deny it, i. e. assert its negation (and the agnostics assert neither).

Neutrality: Opposition to an epistemic principle entails neither the truth nor the falsity of scepticism.

Unfortunately, Bipolarity and Neutrality cannot both be true. To see why let us take a look at the logical form of an epistemic principle. They all state a necessary condition for knowledge:[1]

(*EP*) $\Box \ \forall \varphi \ (K\varphi \rightarrow A(\varphi))$

To illustrate, some examples are:[2]

Closure

$\Box \ \forall \varphi \ (K\varphi \rightarrow \forall \psi \ (K(\varphi \vDash \psi) \rightarrow K\psi))$

KK

$\Box \ \forall \varphi \ (K\varphi \rightarrow KK\varphi)$

Infallibilism

$\Box \ \forall \varphi \ (K\varphi \rightarrow \neg \Diamond \ (B\varphi \wedge \neg \varphi))$

Internalism

$\Box \ \forall \varphi \ (K\varphi \rightarrow \exists \psi \ (\psi J\varphi \wedge \Diamond K\psi))$

The negation of an epistemic principle states that some condition is not necessary for knowledge. More precisely:

(¬*EP*) $\Diamond \ \exists \varphi \ (K\varphi \wedge \neg A(\varphi))$

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[1] To keep things simple I only discuss principles about knowledge, not principles about justification.
[2] The exact formulation of all examples is controversial, but the controversies are inessential to the point to be made below. Instead of quantifying over propositions schemas could be used as well. "$B\varphi$" abbreviates *S believes that* φ, "$\varphi J\psi$" φ *justifies believing* ψ.

($\neg EP$) entails that it is possible that someone knows something. Since scepticism is the thesis that knowledge is impossible, rejecting an epistemic principle commits to the falsity of scepticism.[3] Three examples may illustrate why this observation should come as a surprise. If it stands, debates about scepticism are full of logical mistakes and oversights:

First, there is a debate about which epistemic principles scepticism is tied to; in particular, it is disputed whether there can be such a thing as externalist or fallibilist scepticism or whether scepticism is bound to internalism and infallibilism. But these questions have trivial answers: On the one hand, scepticism is tied to even the strongest epistemic principle since all epistemic principles are vacuously true if scepticism is true and, on the other hand, fallibilism and externalism are trivially inconsistent with scepticism. *Second*, it is widely objected to some anti-sceptical strategies that the strategy is not successful at refuting scepticism despite rejecting an epistemic principle. For example, it is sometimes objected to fallibilist

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[3] As formulated in the main text, the observation is oversimplified. Sceptical theses usually differ from the unqualified claim that knowledge is impossible along three dimensions. *First*, although scepticism is clearly stronger than the thesis that we *de facto* lack knowledge of some matter, the kind of modality involved here is elusive. Does the sceptical thesis assert conceptual, metaphysical or some other kind of impossibility? Fortunately, there is no need to decide on the interpretation of the "$\square$" and "$\diamond$" here. For the puzzle arises as long as scepticism and the various epistemic principles have the *same* modal status, whatever that modal status turns out to be. For example, if scepticism is interpreted best as a metaphysical and not as a conceptual thesis, epistemic principles are interpreted best as metaphysical theses, too. *Second*, the sceptical thesis is often restricted to human knowledge with divine, angelic and animal knowledge being excluded. Again, this does not matter as long as the epistemic principles involved are implicitly restricted to the same kind of (potential) knowers. This is likely to be the case. The debate about, for example, KK is not a debate about iterations of divine knowledge. *Third*, the sceptical thesis is usually restricted to empirical knowledge or some other subset of our purported knowledge. Since the negation of an unrestricted epistemic principle entails only the possibility of *some* knowledge, but not the possibility of, for example, empirical knowledge, opposition to an unrestricted epistemic principle is compatible with restricted scepticism. Yet, this does not dissolve the puzzle: To begin with, it is still noteworthy that denying an epistemic principle commits to the possibility of knowledge, even if only to the possibility of some knowledge or other. More importantly, whatever reasons there are for restricting scepticism to empirical knowledge, these are also reasons for considering predominately restricted versions of the relevant epistemic principles, too. It is no accident that debates about fallibilism, internalism and closure contain mostly examples of empirical knowledge, not of knowledge simpliciter. To sum up, rejecting an epistemic principle *about some kind of knowledge* commits to the falsity of scepticism *about the same kind of knowledge*. But note that there is no such thing as *the* sceptical thesis. Bipolarity and Neutrality are inconsistent only if the sceptical thesis is sufficiently strong. For example, in discussions of the 'paradigm case argument' it is sometimes claimed that a sceptical argument need show no more than that a single paradigm case of my purported knowledge as a matter of fact falls short of knowledge. Therefore, the argument in the main text does not apply to all versions of scepticism. Since it still applies to prominent and widely discussed versions of scepticism, this does not mean that the puzzle lacks relevance.

responses to scepticism that fallibilism is not sufficient for refuting scepticism because there is another sceptical argument that does not rely on infallibilism as a premise. Similarly, it is sometimes objected to the anti-closure strategy that rejection of closure is not sufficient for refuting scepticism because there is another sceptical argument, for example the underdetermination argument, that does not rely on closure as a premise. But denying infallibilism or closure *entails* that knowledge is possible and is trivially sufficient for anti-scepticism independently of whether infallibilism or closure are premises of any sceptical argument. *Third*, there are epistemic principles that are almost universally rejected. For example, everyone (with the possible exception of some, presumably legendary, medieval philosophers) rejects the following necessary condition for knowledge:

Aristotelianism

$\Box \; \forall \varphi \, (K\varphi \rightarrow (\text{Aristotle's (actual) writings} \nvdash \neg\varphi))$

But no one claims that scepticism must be false just because this principle ought to be rejected. But why is that a bad argument against scepticism? For logically the falsity of Aristotelianism entails the falsity of scepticism.

This sets up the puzzle: Bipolarity and Neutrality cannot both be true. Given Bipolarity, once an epistemic principle is rejected, the falsity of scepticism is an immediate logical consequence. But, given Neutrality, rejection of an epistemic principle does not commit to the possibility of knowledge. Yet, both principles are highly plausible: If Bipolarity is given up, opponents of, say, closure do not assert that closure is false – but what else could they be claiming? If Neutrality is given up, we either end up with a new kind of argument against scepticism – for example: Aristotelianism is obviously false, therefore scepticism must be false, too – or we are not justified in rejecting any epistemic principle whatsoever – not even Aristotelianism – unless we are also justified in rejecting scepticism. Thus, the central question of this paper is: What does it mean to oppose an epistemic principle, or a necessary condition in general?

2. Defending the puzzle

Before proposing a solution to this puzzle, a general worry needs to be addressed: Does the puzzle really require an elaborate solution? Or is it an artefact generated by assumptions that are not as plausible as I assumed? In reply, I clarify the nature of the puzzle (subsection 2.1) and motivate its two key assumptions, Bipolarity (subsection 2.2) and Neutrality (subsection 2.3).

2.1. *The nature of the puzzle*

A common objection to my puzzle is that it is not really a serious problem: That statements with the logical form $\Box\,\forall x\,(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$ are vacuously true if Fs are impossible is not something to quibble over. Apparently, the puzzle's origin is an unwillingness to make peace with the standard semantics of the material conditional, the universal quantifier and/or the necessity operator. Although it takes some training to accept that a sentence like "every cop in this building is searching for you" is almost always vacuously true, this is not a reason to reject the standard semantics of such sentences. Analogously, instead of battling against standard semantics we should simply accept that rejection of an epistemic principle commits to the falsity of scepticism and live happily ever after.

The objection misunderstands the puzzle: The problem is not that standard semantics offer counterintuitive truth-conditions for epistemic principles and should, therefore, be revised. As I understand the puzzle, it is about philosophical methodology: Common philosophical methodology does not match standard semantics. According to a view dating back as far as to Socrates, philosophical problems are tackled best by answering questions about Fs only after clarifying what an F is supposed to be. The puzzle casts a doubt on this methodology: Discussing what an F is consists partly in accepting or rejecting various proposed necessary conditions for being an F. But whenever a proposed necessary condition is rejected, one substantive question – i.e., whether Fs are possible – is already answered.[4] Note that the puzzle is not limited to epistemology: Whenever a proposed necessary condition is rejected, one is committed to the possibility of whatever the condition is allegedly necessary for. Especially if the possibility of what the debate is about is controversial, this is unfortunate. The debates about universals, freedom, self-deception, qualia – to name only a few – are full of claims that some proposed condition is not a necessary condition, yet nobody takes this to commit to the possibility of the respective entities. Hence, what philosophers are claiming when rejecting a necessary condition is far from obvious, but essential for understanding the dialectic of many philosophical debates. The puzzle cannot be solved by stubbornly insisting on standard semantics, but only by reconciling common philosophical methodology with it.

2.2. *Bipolarity*

According to Bipolarity, debates about epistemic principles are debates between those who assert an epistemic principle and those who assert its

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[4] In this paper "rejecting a necessary condition" is always shorthand for "rejecting that the condition is a necessary condition for being an F".

negation. Since this is a very fundamental idea, it is difficult to find explicit endorsements of it in the literature. Checking the literature on, for example, closure we find that it is seldom stated outright that closure is false. Instead we read that we need to 'reject', 'deny', 'give up' or should 'not require' closure, but an explanation of what exactly someone claims who rejects, denies, gives up or does not require closure is almost never given.

Bipolarity offers such an explanation. Debates about an epistemic principle are dealing with a yes/no-question, the question being whether the epistemic principle in question is true. Hence, if one takes a stand on the matter at all (that is, does not withhold belief), one can either be a proponent (asserting it) or opponent (asserting its negation) of the principle. I call this the *harmony argument*: The number of positions available in a debate should mirror the number of ways the world might be or, less metaphorically, should equal the number of possible semantic values of the proposition at issue (+1 for agnosticism).

By itself the harmony argument does not rule out that some of those who reject, give up or do not require an epistemic principle merely withhold belief on the principle. But as a description of the actual philosophical practice this account is unconvincing. Being agnostic about an epistemic principle is not a form of opposition to it.[5] If someone withholds belief because 'the jury is still out', she does not oppose the principle in question, but is merely cautious. Moreover, if rejection consisted in withholding belief, the role of counterexamples, which are ubiquitous in debates about epistemic principles, would not be accounted for. Offering a counterexample to an epistemic principle would be superfluous if all one wanted to promote is withholding belief on it.

2.3. *Neutrality*

According to Neutrality, opposition to an epistemic principle is neutral with respect to the truth or falsity of scepticism. As a matter of fact *every* epistemologist rejects *some* epistemic principle. Descartes rejects at least Aristotelianism, while many contemporary internalists also reject KK and infallibilism. Externalists additionally reject internalism and some of them closure. None of them, however, infers the falsity of scepticism from the failure of a necessary condition for knowledge. To the contrary, it is widely discussed whether rejection of any of the mentioned epistemic principles is

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[5] That does not rule out that in *some* debates withholding belief may be counted as an adversarial position. For example, intuitionists do not assert the law of excluded middle, but do not reject or deny it either. It is simply not a logical truth according to them. Yet intuitionism is often considered to be somehow in opposition to the law of excluded middle.

sufficient for dispelling scepticism. This is strong indication of a wide-spread acceptance of Neutrality.

Neutrality is not only widely accepted, but can also be argued for by reflecting on the role of rejecting an epistemic principle when debating scepticism: Rejecting a necessary condition for knowledge is sometimes instrumental in blocking a sceptical argument, but blocking an argument by rejecting a premise is not tantamount to rejecting the conclusion itself. Arguments for scepticism usually proceed by laying down some (allegedly plausible) necessary condition for knowledge and arguing then that this condition cannot be met. Accordingly, responding to scepticism consists in *either* rejecting the proposed necessary condition (indirect response) *or* in insisting that the condition can be met after all (direct response). Without Neutrality this distinction would wane: Indirect responses would not merely block the argument, but entail the possibility of knowledge. Since arguing that some allegedly necessary condition is not in fact necessary for knowledge does not reveal the correct necessary conditions for knowledge, among the correct necessary conditions there still might be a condition that it is impossible to meet. This line of reasoning can be summarised as the *symmetry argument*: Internalism and externalism, infallibilism and fallibilism etc. are symmetrical pairs insofar as they both argue for opposing views about the *nature* of knowledge and not for opposing views about the *possibility* of knowledge. Without Neutrality these positions would not be pairs of opposing answers to the same problem, but would be answers to different questions. Without Neutrality it would be impossible to separate the debate about the correct necessary conditions for knowledge from the debate about scepticism.

The symmetry argument leads to a version of Neutrality that should not be confused with other, stronger or different neutrality claims. Neutrality as introduced here states that opposition to an epistemic principle does not logically commit to the falsity or truth of scepticism. Neither does it entail a general constraint on what is permissible as evidence nor does it rule out that there may be other reasons for assuming from the outset that scepticism must be false.

According to the principle of evidence neutrality (as discussed and rejected by Williamson, cf. Williamson (2007, 208–215)), only what is "uncontentiously decidable" (Williamson (2007, 210)) may be cited as evidence in a philosophical debate. Williamson's main worry about evidence neutrality stems from its epistemic consequences: Although relying only on neutral evidence is possible, it is epistemically disastrous since in philosophy there just is not enough neutral evidence to work with. Neutrality as discussed in this paper is a different principle and the nature of the puzzle is different as well. It only states that a particular kind of claim – opposition to a necessary condition – neither commits to nor is evidence

for the possibility or existence of what the necessary condition is allegedly necessary for, but is not a general constraint on evidence. The puzzle is an objection to Neutrality not because permitting non-neutral evidence is epistemically advantageous, but because there is no neutral evidence to begin with. What is at stake are not the epistemic consequences of restricting oneself to neutral evidence, but whether we can even formulate what the sceptic and the anti-sceptic disagree about. Thus, the puzzle is interesting even to those who are already convinced by Williamson's objections to evidence neutrality: It can either lead to an additional argument against evidence neutrality or to a restricted defense of a very limited version of evidence neutrality.[6]

Furthermore, Neutrality in no way entails that it is in general inappropriate to assume the falsity of scepticism, but only that it is inappropriate to assume the falsity of scepticism *just because* of opposition to some epistemic principle. Therefore, it is not an objection to Neutrality (or my claim that Neutrality is a widely accepted methodological assumption) that many or even most epistemologists are willing to assume the falsity of scepticism from the outset. For the point of rejecting a necessary condition is not to express one's anti-sceptical leanings, but to clarify what knowledge is supposed to be. The reason for making the anti-sceptical assumption may, for example, be (Moore's) argument that the commonsense assumption that we do have knowledge (of some target class) is more certain than any philosophical argument to the contrary and that scepticism is, therefore, a paradoxical, unacceptable position.

To sum up, Neutrality as introduced in this paper does not entail that epistemological debates should always be neutral with respect to scepticism, but only that a commitment to the falsity of scepticism cannot arise simply from rejecting an epistemic principle. Thus, what is puzzling is not being committed to the falsity of scepticism itself (for that might be good news), but being committed to the falsity of scepticism in virtue of opposing an epistemic principle (for that is the wrong kind of reason).

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[6] That opposition to an epistemic principle cannot be cited as evidence against scepticism may suggest an alternative to Neutrality. According to the *transmission failure account*, although opposition to an epistemic principle entails the falsity of scepticism, warrant does not transmit from opposition to an epistemic principle to the falsity of scepticism. Even if rejection of an epistemic principle commits to the falsity of scepticism, the former does not provide warrant for the latter. Although this account would explain why rejection of an epistemic principle cannot be cited as a reason for rejecting scepticism, it does not explain what someone who says 'no' to some epistemic principle or other means: If it plays no evidential role, what role does it play instead?

3. Rejection and denial

To sum up my argument so far, Neutrality and Bipolarity are both highly plausible and incompatible. Several options are available at this stage: The *first* option is logical or semantical revision: Epistemic principles might not have the logical form or semantic properties I supposed they had. I do not pursue this option here because I want to explore less revisionary approaches.[7] The *second* option is to give up Neutrality: This would require

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[7] But let me briefly mention four accounts I have heard several times in response to my puzzle. According to the *grounding account* (inspired by Fine, cf. Fine (2012) for an overview), epistemic principles are not about what is necessarily true, but about what grounds knowledge. For example, that $2 + 2 = 4$ is not a genuine necessary condition for knowledge although necessarily if someone knows something, $2 + 2 = 4$. For someone does not know something *because*, not even partly, $2 + 2 = 4$. Importantly, knowledge's not being grounded in arithmetical facts is compatible with the impossibility of knowledge. Whatever the merits of such a distinction, it does not solve the puzzle: If rejecting an epistemic principle meant no more than denying that it is grounded in knowledge, rejection would be compatible with accepting the principle and rejection would be dialectically useless when responding to scepticism.

According to the *counterfactual account*, while denial consists in believing that an epistemic principle is actually false, rejection consists in believing that it would be false if there was any knowledge. Since counterfactuals with impossible antecedents are usually considered to be trivially true, this approach should be combined with an impossible worlds account of counterpossibles (cf. Nolan (2013), Brogaard & Salerno (2013)). Otherwise a sceptic should trivially reject all epistemic principle. This account does not solve the puzzle either. Rejecting an epistemic principle would be compatible with defending it. Suppose someone is a staunch defender of closure and a sceptic. She believes that closure is both a fundamental truth about knowledge and responsible for the impossibility of knowledge. Therefore, she believes that the only way for there to be knowledge (which she takes to be impossible) requires the falsity of closure. Thus, she believes that if there was any knowledge, knowledge would not be closed. Yet, she does not oppose closure. (Analogously, nobody turns into an opponent of contemporary physics by accepting that if a perpetuum mobile existed, our thermodynamics textbooks would be false.)

According to *affirmativism* (inspired by Kripke (2014), the label is mine), all that matters is which epistemic principles are affirmed: "Instead of thinking that others hold views that are 'false', rather one admits that there are views that we are more or less reluctant to accept." (Kripke (2014, 384)). If, for example, closure is not affirmed, there need not be anything that is affirmed instead. Some epistemic principles are affirmed whereas others (for example, Aristotelianism) are plainly not affirmed – end of the story. The main disadvantage of this account is that it downplays the difference between non-affirmation and rejection. As a matter of fact, most opponents of a particular epistemic principle do not merely think that there are no reasons for affirming it, but reasons for opposing it. Affirmativism ignores the latter part and, therefore, does not square well with actual philosophical practice. (Note that Kripke is well aware of the revisionary nature of affirmativism.)

According to the *aboutness view* (cf. Yablo (2014)), (assertive) sentences have a subject matter – what they are about – in addition to truth conditions. For example, "primes over 10 are even" is at least partially false independently of whether numbers exist. For generalizations like that – general assertions about objects whose existence is disputed – "have a generic part stating how objects of the relevant sort behave *qua objects of that sort*, and an existential part to the effect that the relevant objects are there" (Yablo (2014, 91)). However,

biting the bullet and accepting that rejecting an epistemic principle does commit to the falsity of scepticism. I do not pursue this option either. I have already argued that it requires revising common philosophical methodology considerably and is viable only if one is willing to accept that debates about epistemic principles are marred by logical mistakes. The *third* option is to give up Bipolarity: Rejecting an epistemic principle is not to be equated with asserting its negation. Not all opponents of an epistemic principle assert its negation, but rather some opponents deny it, some reject it. The central idea is that rejection is not belief in a different proposition, but a complex attitude towards an epistemic principle. This is the option I explore in this paper. "Denial" will be reserved for holding true the negation of the epistemic principle, while "rejection" will be used for referring to a complex attitude to it.[8] After introducing rejection as a complex attitude (subsection 3.1), I discuss the epistemology of rejection to illustrate how this account of rejection can be put to work (subsection 3.2).

3.1. *Rejection*

It is common to distinguish between three doxastic attitudes one can entertain with respect to any proposition: One either believes it, disbelieves it or withholds belief on it. Rejection is neither of these attitudes. It is stronger than withholding, but falls short of disbelieving. It falls short of believing its negation because otherwise rejection would entail the problematic possibility claim. It is stronger than withholding belief because withholding belief is not a form of opposition. Instead, rejection involves some sort of commitment against the proposition at issue. Thus, there are two aspects of rejection: On the one hand, rejection involves withholding on whether scepticism is true, that is, on whether knowledge is possible. On the other hand, rejection is distinct from mere agnosticism. Accordingly, my proposal is to think of rejection as consisting of two parts: One part consists in withholding belief on whether the epistemic principle is true and the other part consists in the conditional commitment to believing the negation of the epistemic principle if knowledge should (turn out to) be possible. Rejection

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applying this idea to our puzzle is not straightforward: On the one hand, while fictionalists think of mathematical discourse as a useful fiction and partially true, sceptics generally do not think of knowledge ascriptions as a useful fiction or partially true. On the other hand, given Yablo's definition of partial truth, partial truth does not rule out that the negation is also partially true. It is not clear, therefore, what the consequences of insisting on the partial falsity of an epistemic principle are. Despite these worries I find Yablo's description of the phenomena instructive, but I disagree that they call for a semantic solution.

[8] Of course, this is not a claim about the ordinary usage of "deny" and "reject". I use these two terms as technical terms.

is withholding belief combined with conditional denial. Of course, this conception of rejection stands in need of several explanations.

The first necessary condition for rejection is that one withholds belief on the epistemic principle in question.[9] The rationale behind this condition is that it ensures Neutrality: Since neither the principle nor its negation are believed, the problematic inference is blocked. Moreover, although the content on which one withholds belief is the epistemic principle in question, rejection of an epistemic principle rationally leads to withholding belief on whether knowledge is possible. It is irrational to not withhold belief on whether knowledge is possible when withholding belief on the principle. It is irrational to *disbelieve* that knowledge is possible because if knowledge is impossible the principle is a trivial logical consequence. If someone believes that knowledge is impossible and also knows that this entails the epistemic principle, it is irrational to not believe the epistemic principle. That it is irrational to *believe* that knowledge is possible (when rejecting an epistemic principle) is a consequence of the second necessary condition for rejection to which I turn now.

The second necessary condition for rejection is that one commits oneself to disbelieving the epistemic principle if knowledge is possible. The rationale behind this condition is that it ensures that rejection is a kind of opposition. Although those who reject an epistemic principle do not actually disbelieve it, they are committed to disbelieve it if some condition is met. Thus, rejection is not outright, but conditional denial.

Conditional denial of some proposition is not the same as believing a conditional proposition – if C, then P is false –, but a commitment to disbelieve P if condition C is met. Conditional beliefs in this sense are like conditional promises which are not promises to see to it that a conditional is true, but commitments to do the promised action if some condition is met. A conditional belief is expressed by, for example, "if you swear you haven't done it, I believe that you're innocent", "if this experiment can be replicated, I'll give up my theory" or "I won't believe it 'till I see it". All these cases are neither beliefs in a conditional – the point is not, for example, the triviality that if the speaker sees that P, P – nor predictions about what one will believe – no prediction is made about which psychological mechanisms are switched on if, for example, one's pet theory is falsified. Instead, utterances of "If C, I believe that P" usually express a conditional commitment. Note that the condition is not that the subject *believes* that C is met. Of course, conditional beliefs with unknown conditions do not have any normative consequences. Similarly, when promising

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[9] I do not presuppose any particular account of withholding belief, that is, whether withholding belief is absence of belief, intentional absence of belief or a doxastic attitude *sui generis*, cf. Friedman (2013) for a discussion of these options.

"if Goldbach's conjecture is false, I'll buy you a drink" a drink is not due until *it turns out that* Goldbach's conjecture is false.[10]

Applying this account of conditional belief to the problem at hand, rejection of an epistemic principle is understood not as a belief about what would be the case if knowledge was possible, but as a commitment to deny the principle if (it turns out that) knowledge is possible. Thus, those who reject an epistemic principle disbelieve or deny the epistemic principle only conditionally. To sum up, my discussion suggests the following account of rejection:

> **Rejection:** *S* rejects an epistemic principle *EP* iff
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>   i) *S* withholds belief on the epistemic principle and
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>   ii) *S* commits herself to believing that ¬*EP* if (it turns out that) knowledge is possible.

This account of rejection is understood best as a rational reconstruction of what philosophers are claiming when opposing a necessary condition. It is not a description of their mental state if they are oblivious of the distinction between rejection and denial. Yet, if opponents of a necessary condition are acting as if they were rejecting a necessary condition, the distinction can be a useful tool for rationalisation. Thus, my account of rejection should not be misunderstood as a descriptive thesis. Apart from postulating a new complex propositional attitude, however, the account is not revisionary. It neither presumes particular, potentially controversial accounts of withholding, conditionals or commitments nor does it require semantical revision. Even if the complex propositional attitude is unfamiliar, the building blocks of the definition are ordinary and well-known.

These advantages come with a disadvantage: The definition is highly specific to rejecting epistemic principles and necessary conditions in general, but cannot easily be applied to rejecting and denying propositions of different logical forms. Although this is clearly a downside of the account, it also allows to simplify it. The aim of this paper is not to introduce and defend a general distinction between rejection and denial applicable to arbitrary propositions, but to solve a particular puzzle and to advertise a sketch of a distinction likely to be useful elsewhere as well. Whether and how the distinction might be generalised lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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[10] Admittedly, "it turns out that" is vague. The phrase is needed because the beliefs of the promiser (or promisee) are irrelevant. On the one hand, if they irrationally believe that Goldbach's conjecture is false, no obligation to buy a drink is triggered, although they may falsely believe that it is. On the other hand, if they withhold belief on whether Goldbach's conjecture is true (because of not keeping themselves informed about recent advances in mathematics), the obligation may be triggered independently of what they actually believe.

3.2. *The epistemology of rejection*

The account of rejection of an epistemic principle is not complete yet: It should not only tell us what rejection is, but importantly it should also tell us something about the epistemology of rejection, that is, how rejection can be justified and what its epistemic consequences are.

Epistemic principles are usually rejected on the basis of counterexamples presented in the form of thought experiments. Consider, for example, a common counterexample to KK:

> SUN: Anne is a three-year old child. Looking out of the window she comes to know that the sun is shining. Being three year old she does not possess the relevant concepts to reflect on this cognitive episode and does not form the belief that she believes that the sun is shining.

A common assessment of Sun is that Anne knows that the sun is shining, but does not know that she knows because believing that one believes is a necessary condition for knowing that one knows that is not met by Anne. Therefore, KK is false.

As they are commonly interpreted, thought experiment arguments of this kind involve two premises: A possibility premise according to which the scenario is possible and an assessment premise according to which something is the case in the scenario. In the case of Sun, the first premise states that Sun is possible and the second premise states that the protagonist of Sun, Anne, knows but does not know that she knows. The logical form of the assessment premise is currently hotly debated (cf. Williamson (2007, 179–207), Malmgren (2011)), but the possibility premise is of more interest here. On the one hand, without the possibility premise the intended conclusion is not logically entailed. On the other hand, the thought experiment does not tell us whether knowledge is possible at all, but merely supposes that it is. Reflecting merely on the facts described in Sun does not help with refuting scepticism because they are silent on, for example, whether and how Anne knows she is not dreaming. Hence, the possibility premise must be known for the thought experiment to be successful, but can only be known by relying on arguments external to the thought experiment itself. Again, that is an unfortunate result because it rules out debating the necessary conditions for knowledge before debating the possibility of knowledge.

The account of rejection defended here allows to explain the epistemic role of thought experiments with a doubtful possibility premise (or, with a possibility premise that it is dialectically inappropriate to rely on). Even if such thought experiments do not justify denial of the epistemic principle at issue, they at least justify rejection: Although the possibility of the scenario is doubtful, it can give rise to a conditional commitment, in this case, to believing that Anne has knowledge without knowledge that she knows if (it turns out that) knowledge in general is possible. Whether rejection is indeed

justified depends on the nature of the doubt about the possibility of the scenario: In the case of Sun the doubt about the possibility premise has nothing to do with the details of the case. The same doubt would apply if the proposition was a different external world proposition or the protagonist had different cognitive abilities. Of course, if the doubt was specific to the details of the description, rejection would not be justified. For example, someone who doubts that knowledge about the weather can be acquired by looking out of the window is not justified in rejecting KK based on Sun, but should simply withhold belief on whether the scenario is possible. Thus, rejection is justified only if the possibility premise is doubtful because of general reasons external to the specific facts described in the thought experiment. When conducting a thought experiment we often can and sometimes should suppress such doubts, but should also keep in mind that in this case only rejection is justified, but not denial.

Turning from the justification of rejection to its epistemic consequences, the account defended here also explains the role of rejection when replying to sceptical arguments. If an epistemic principle is justifiedly rejected, it is dialectically inappropriate to rely on it as a premise. For such a principle is one we justifiedly withhold belief on, but would accept only if it turned out that knowledge is impossible. To avoid begging the question sceptical arguments may only rely on epistemic principles we are committed to whether or not knowledge is possible.

To sum up, the account of rejection as withholding belief combined with conditional denial explains both how rejection fits with the common methodology of thought experiments and why rejection is sufficient for neutralising sceptical arguments.

4. Conclusion

It is remarkably difficult to explain what someone is claiming who rejects a necessary condition, both in general and in the case of epistemic principles. The first aim of this paper was to draw attention to this rarely noted difficulty, the second aim was to propose a solution. The proposal defended here has both comforting and surprising features: It is comforting because it requires neither extensive change of philosophical methodology nor semantical or logical revision. The analysis of necessary conditions need not rely on non-classical accounts of the conditional, on impossible worlds or on any other revisionary devices. Yet, the proposal is also surprising because it entails that there are more doxastic attitudes than believing, disbelieving and withholding belief. It requires, in particular, to distinguish between two different oppositional doxastic attitudes, rejection and denial. As a consequence, my proposal requires that philosophers be clearer about

whether they are denying or merely rejecting an allegedly necessary condition when saying 'no' to it. Of course, alternative proposals have not been ruled out in this paper in a principled way. But any proposal that does not distinguish between rejection and denial will be revisionary or surprising in other respects. On balance, then, the distinction between rejection and denial offers an analysis of what philosophers may be claiming when opposing a necessary condition that at the very least sets a benchmark for alternative proposals.

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