

# Why Only Virtues Can Confer Epistemic Dispositions: The Occasionalist Demon

Por qué solo las virtudes pueden conferir disposiciones epistémicas: el demonio ocasionalista

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I will argue that, contrary to what happens with Schaffer's debasing demon, that is not even able to threaten our knowledge of the external world, there is a demon —*the occasionalist demon*— that plays epistemic havoc merely by being possible. The occasionalist demon argues for an antirealist view on epistemic dispositions so that he forces virtue epistemologists into a dilemma between counting virtues as mere occasional causes of cognitive achievements (which is simply abandoning their theory) and committing themselves to metaphysical claims about how faculties are constituted and about how they are related to successful epistemic performances, specifically, to claims about the internal and logical relation captured by Sosa's concept of 'manifestation'. This paper aims thus at clarifying what it really involves to endorse a virtue epistemology. It will be argued that Sosa's account of the primitive character of the relation of manifestation is crucial to effectively overcome the challenge raised by the occasionalist demon.

Virtue Epistemology · Epistemic Dispositions · Knowledge · Radical Scepticism · Performance Normativity.

Se argumentará que, a diferencia de lo que sucede con el demonio de Schaffer, que ni siquiera amenaza nuestro conocimiento del mundo externo, existe otra hipótesis —la hipótesis del *demonio ocasionalista*— cuya mera posibilidad basta para poner en cuestión la posesión actual de conocimiento. El demonio ocasionalista implica una concepción anti-realista de las disposiciones epistémicas, y, por tanto, obliga a los epistemólogos de virtudes a afrontar un dilema cuyas dos opciones son la de concebir las virtudes epistémicas como meras causas ocasionales de los logros cognitivos (lo que conllevaría el abandono de la teoría) o, en su defecto, la de comprometerse con tesis metafísicas sustantivas acerca de la constitución de las facultades y de la relación que éstas guardan con las actuaciones epistémicas exitosas, un tipo de relación *interna* que el concepto de 'manifestación' de Sosa captura. Este artículo tiene como objetivo la elucidación de las bases metafísicas implícitas en la epistemología de virtudes. Se mostrará que el carácter primitivo de la relación de manifestación (tal como lo analiza Sosa) es un elemento crucial para la superación efectiva del reto escéptico planteado por el demonio ocasionalista.

Epistemología de virtudes · Disposiciones epistémicas · Conocimiento · Escepticismo radical · Normatividad de la actuación.

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## §1. Introduction

**U**NDER THE PRESSURE OF SCHAFFER'S DEBASING DEMON, epistemologists are increasingly becoming demonologists, or, if of a more sensitive nature, victims of demonic possession. It seems to me, however, that they are haunted by lesser demons and that their sceptical nightmares are laughable when compared to the kind of trouble that the demon that is about to manifest makes. Let us call him *the occasionalist demon*. There are several traits that are conspicuous about him. First, the occasionalist demon is a friendly and quite tractable creature —one that reveals himself either as a benign angel or, in his most exalted condition, as the extant laws of nature. It goes without saying that those laws are marked by an amicable and helpful disposition. The occasionalist demon is also reluctant to manipulate the environment, and so to reveal himself as an ad hoc situational factor (as a benign angel). It rather prefers to constitute a non-manipulated environment (world) where cognitive processes and epistemic virtues are causally and systematically related to the truth. Finally, the occasionalist demon is such that his metaphysical possibility entails his actuality so that from the possible demon it immediately follows that we actually live *in a demon world* and thus, that we actually lack knowledge. This means that to secure knowledge, it is not enough to argue that the occasionalist demon is a distant, and so an irrelevant alternative. The occasionalist demon threatens radical doubt and plays epistemic havoc merely by being possible.

The occasionalist demon does not prey on the truth condition, but rather on the non-accidentality requirement for knowledge. It is, therefore, parasitic on the view that cognitive processes count as virtues that yield knowledge only if there is a proper and non-accidental connection between them and truth, a connection that the demon dooms. The occasionalist demon argues thus for an *antirealist view on dispositions*, whether they are epistemic dispositions of the agent to get it right that *p* or physical dispositions that natural properties confer

on their bearers.

Suppose we take the relation that the outputs of an intellectual virtue have to the things they are of to be *causal variance* so that what connects the results of the operation of a virtue (for instance, the visual experience of a red square) to the facts that make it correct (a red square) is simply that this kind of functioning is the causally operative condition that would bring about the success of such performance. On this view, we are no longer thinking of virtues as constitutively defined by the world structure so that the dispositional partners of the virtue are built into its very content and directedness. Rather we are thinking either in terms of an order of faculties that is systematically causally connected with an *independent* order of facts or, more specifically, in terms of an order of basic acts (or, when at the sub-personal level, functionings) that is systematically causally connected with an *independent* order of epistemic successes. The occasionalist demon is nothing else than the stable bridge that *nomologically connects* those two independent domains.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, the demon helps to save the day at the cost of making virtues epistemologically idle.

Curiously enough, the occasionalist demon has haunted for centuries the realms of the philosophy of action, raising the problem of how to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary actions. This «obstinate problem» (Wittgenstein 1981, § 590) revolves around cases such as that of what makes the difference between raising the arm and the arm raising so that it is formulated in terms of a contrast between two situations that have to be distinct while seeming exactly as the same situation. The occasionalist demon has for long escaped the attention of epistemologists. However, increasing awareness of the fact that cognitive achievements are akin to successful performances and, consequently, of how performance normativity also encompasses judgments and beliefs, it makes the escalation of fear inevitable. As was only to be expected, the demon thrives on virtues, whether the ethical or the intellectual ones.

<sup>1</sup> There is an important difference here between traditional occasionalism, with the discrete and direct intervention of God, and the occasionalist demon, whose intervention is emphatically continual, universal, and indirect. However, both of them are intrinsically related by their common denial of *genuine powers*, that is to say, by the view that virtues, volitions and natural properties only are occasional causes of, respectively, successful beliefs, intentional actions and dispositions. In my view, this is reason enough to talk about the demon as an occasionalist demon.

Following Molnar (2003, p. 104), I would distinguish between the *act occasionalism* of Malebranche and the *rule occasionalism* that the current demon would institute. However, the two of them are varieties of occasionalism.

In section 2, I will deal with Schaffer's debasing demon. I will argue that contrary to Schaffer's view, the debasing demon is able neither to imperil *cogito propositions* traditionally considered as immune from doubt nor to ground by itself a (in comparison) moderate sceptical conclusion about our knowledge of the external world. The overarching goal is to identify the presuppositions that block the debasing demon to threaten even a quite limited doubt and, by showing how the occasionalist demon does not depend on such problematic assumptions, to contrast the unconvincing nature of the former with the forcible character of the latter. In section 3, I will develop the hypothesis of the occasionalist demon. I will argue that, although of the family of mimics and interferences, the occasionalist demon is immune to strategies that avoid counterexamples to the Simple Counterfactual Analysis of dispositions by prefixing the associated conditional with a *ceteris paribus* clause that qualifies its truth within the range of normal circumstances. I will then argue that the occasionalist demon forces the virtue epistemologist into a dilemma between counting virtues as mere occasional causes of cognitive achievements (which is simply abandoning his theory) and committing himself to metaphysical claims about the constitution of cognitive faculties and about how faculties and successful epistemic performances are related, specifically, to claims about the internal and logical relation captured by Sosa's concept of «manifestation». Finally, in section 4, I will conclude with some brief indications on how a response to the occasionalist demon might be constructed. The overarching thesis is that a virtue epistemologist cannot coherently claim that the occasionalist demon is even possible, or, by the same token, that much more unfriendly creatures out of the epistemic hell are possibly haunting the empty realms of alternative worlds. In this sense, this paper aims at clarifying what it really involves to endorse a virtue epistemology.

## §2. A demon bound

Schaffer's (2010) debasing demon threatens to raise a universal and unbounded doubt —a doubt such as to engulf the *cogito* and so to improve on the sceptical limitations of the Cartesian deceiver. The debasing demon seems thus to drown everything in the sceptical deluge and to deprive us of what the Meditator demands: «just one firm and immovable point» (AT VII, p. 24 / CSM II, p. 16) that, saved from the sceptical shipwreck, may be the starting basis from which to rebuild our knowledge. Self-evident propositions, introspective knowledge, knowledge about our own existence, etc. —they are venerable

epistemic idols that answer to the touch of Schaffer's tuning fork with a hollow sound.

The debasing demon allows his victims true beliefs, but he makes them acquire those beliefs by belief-forming processes whose outputs we would consider to be unjustified. Examples of such improper bases would be confused reasoning, emotional attachment, wishful thinking, guesswork, and mere hunches. All of them are possible modes of belief production that sharply contrast with processes that intuitively issue in epistemically justified beliefs, such as perception, memory, introspection and intuitive reasoning. But the debasing demon special trick consists in erasing all traces of the improper basis out of which his victims' beliefs are formed, leaving them with the false impression that their beliefs are properly based. In this sense, the debasing demon operates *by manipulating the source of beliefs in a way that is introspectively undetectable by the victims*. Given that the debasing demon is metaphysically possible and that we can never know whether we are his victims or not, it follows that we lack knowledge of everything, even of those bits of squalid but invulnerable knowledge that traditionally were thought to survive the full force of the sceptical onslaught.

This is the argument in a nutshell. Let us begin to evaluate it by taking a closer look. But first, a historical point is worth mentioning.

Schaffer is keen to emphasize both that, unlike the debasing demon, the Cartesian demon threatens knowledge by preying on the truth requirement, and that, contrary to Descartes' project of «a general demolition of [his] opinions» (AT VII, p. 18 / CSM II, p. 12), the deceiving demon grounds a variety of scepticism that falls short of being universal. The distinction between the old and the new demon would thus be of two kinds: that which relates to the *condition for knowledge* that each demon dooms (true belief, proper basing), and that which relates to the *scope* of their respective powers.

In the first place, it is not true that the deceiving demon targets the truth condition. For one thing, Ballantyne & Evans (2013) have forcefully argued that since the Cartesian argument proceeds by moving from the possibility of the deceiving demon to the claim that we actually lack knowledge and, consequently, to the claim that we would lack knowledge even if fortunate enough to be in a world such that the demon is either inexistent or inoperative and that our beliefs are thus normally true, the deceiving demon attacks, not the truth requirement, but a peculiarly strong version of the justification condition (*cf.* Ballantyne & Evans 2013, p. 553). Curiously enough, this strong

justification is also required for Schaffer's sceptical conclusion. A similar point is supported by even a cursory glance at Descartes' view of error —a view that, by emphasizing that falsity is not necessary for error and that arriving at the truth by chance is incompatible with knowledge (*cf.* AT VII, p. 60 / CSM II, p. 41), it makes clear that for Descartes *a proper and reliable aetiology is highly pertinent to the epistemic status of beliefs*. On this view, the evil demon casts doubt upon the proper and non-accidental connection of our cognitive faculties with truth.

Perhaps most important, Schaffer is also wrong when suggesting that the Cartesian demon leaves a residuum of knowledge (Schaffer 2010, p. 228). The *cogito* itself falls prey to radical scepticism when, in the Third Meditation, Descartes considers both that our mind might be so badly constituted as to make us wrong even in matters «which seemed most evident» (AT VII, p. 36 / CSM II, p. 25) and that, given the unlimited powers of the demon, «it would be easy for him» to deceive us even on things «which [we] think [we] perceive very clearly» (AT VII, p. 36 / CSM II, p. 25). It is precisely this hyperbolic doubt what motivates Descartes' theological project, thus leading to the conspicuous problem of the Cartesian circle. However, there is an all-important difference between how the Cartesian universal doubt is (provisionally) raised and how Schaffer argues for it, a difference detrimental to the latter view (but more on this later).

The most curious thing is, however, that on Schaffer's reconstruction of universal doubt the unlimited scope of scepticism is *necessarily* invariant under different threats to different conditions for knowledge, to wit, that whatever could be the stage in the belief-formation process that a demon dooms — among the cohort of ten sorts of demons that Schaffer identifies (Schaffer 2010,

p. 235)—, it would always result in universal doubt.<sup>2</sup> This not only means that by Schaffer's own lights Cartesian scepticism would be *constitutively unbounded* so that the debasing demon would not really improve on the sceptical limitations of the old demon (there are no such limitations), but more importantly, that all demons are epistemically on a par so that *the debasing demon would not enhance traditional scepticism (properly understood)*. Schaffer would not thus contribute to radical scepticism with a particularly powerful scenario. He would contribute to it with a fresh (and ultimately defective) look at how sceptical scenarios work.

But let us focus on the debasing demon. Is such demon able to raise a universal doubt? Moreover, is he able even to generate a more modest version of scepticism, one that refers to the external world?

Three aspects of Schaffer's argument strike me as particularly important, and I will say a little about each. They are (i) Schaffer's (implicit) distinction between *proper* and *improper* bases of belief-production; (ii) his distinction between evidence and beliefs, one that could perfectly be glossed as a distinction between two kinds of mental states — *experiences* and *beliefs*; and (iii) the crucial step in the argument from the possible debasing demon to our actual lack of knowledge.

Schaffer's argument heavily depends on the intuitive contrast between proper and improper bases for beliefs. Beliefs are *improperly* formed when based on things like guesswork and wishful thinking. By contrast, beliefs based on understanding, introspection, visual evidence, and so on, would be (under the right conditions of shape and situation) *properly* based. But what is it that makes of the latter operations proper bases for belief-formation, when they are? Plausibly, and unlike cases of guesswork and wishful thinking, they are thought to be cognitive mechanisms non-accidentally connected with the truth. The

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that Schaffer is highly ambiguous on the scope of the Cartesian demon. On the one hand, he is eager to underline that, unlike the debasing demon, the deceiving demon is unable to generate a universal doubt. However, he is also reluctant to commit himself to the idea that the debasing demon is the only universal demon (*cf.* Schaffer 2010, p. 234) so that he grants the Cartesian demon (among other demons) the possibility «of threatening our knowledge of our own existence» (Schaffer 2010, p. 234). This ambiguity stems from a deeper tension that threatens Schaffer's argument to collapse, a tension that we will be able to fully appreciate at a later stage of this survey. Notice that the claim that universal scepticism is the necessary result of every possible demon and the claim that the debasing demon improves on the limited scope of traditional sceptical scenarios do not go together well. However, I will argue that Schaffer is necessarily and implicitly committed to the former claim. Let us consider the above remarks as a first suggestion that not everything is perfectly fine with Schaffer's view.

trouble is that, were those procedures accidentally connected with the truth, they would count as *improper* bases so that there would be no fundamental epistemic difference between the position of a subject that, unbeknownst to him, formed his beliefs by unreliable standard procedures and the position of a victim of the debasing demon whose beliefs would be acquired via guesswork. The point is that it would be enough to imagine a demon that, while allowing his victims true beliefs, manipulates, not the apparent source, but the reliability of the real source of their beliefs and that disguises this manipulation to make it undetectable, to take an easier route to universal doubt. Schaffer's argument would thus be unnecessary, and, to my mind, the motivation to raise it, elusive.

Notice that Schaffer could not argue for his favouring of the debasing demon by appealing to a fundamental epistemic difference between the performances of the agent whose beliefs are conditioned by the (unreliable) evidence —performances that would be flawed without redounding to the discredit of the performer—, and the irrational performances of the agent whose beliefs were formed by guessing or by wishful thinking so that his performances would be flawed as well as discreditable.

For one thing, even if the beliefs of the first agent were not discreditable, this would not make them justified. If, as Sosa aptly argues (Sosa 1991, p. 290; Sosa 2015, p. 203), «justification» is an honorific term whose cognitive worth depends on the connection of justified beliefs with truth and that cannot be wholly isolated from truth to apply properly, then the objective position of our two agents would be, *and whatever could be their respective positions in terms either of rationality or of inner coherence among the members of their belief-systems, indistinguishable from the perspective of epistemic justification.*

More importantly, however, Schaffer blocks this strategy by making the victims of the debasing demon unaware of the defective ways through which their beliefs were formed. From the first-person perspective indispensable to the sceptical problem (and maybe to epistemology proper), there would thus be no detectable difference whatsoever between creditable and discreditable beliefs, or, better said, there would be nothing discreditable in the beliefs of an agent so deluded as to wrongly think that he is acting rationally. In this sense, it is on the basis of awareness that epistemic credit is given or refused. Both from the perspective of epistemic justification and from the point of view of their innermost awareness (an awareness that includes their first-order beliefs and a meta-belief —whether right or not— on the sources of their beliefs and their reliability) the two agents are in the same position. Thus, preying by means of



highly sophisticated tricks and indirect stratagems on the non-accidentality condition that yields knowledge and epistemic justification, the debasing demon still seems redundant and unmotivated.

It strikes me that the only way for making sense of Schaffer's favouring of the debasing demon would be by paying attention to the intrinsic limits of a doubt that dooms the non-accidentality requirement. On the one hand, such doubt would isolate cognitive mechanisms and their deliverances from truth, while leaving foundational and first-person accessible bases for the agent's beliefs about his own mental states and operations —foundations that, although internal to the subject's mind, would not be reducible to the contents of beliefs, and thus, that could properly function as epistemic bases for beliefs and as regress-stoppers *independently of their own epistemic status*. Whether flawed or not, intellectual seemings, visual experiences, mnemotic performances, and so on, would thus be *self-presenting states* (Sosa 2015, pp. 205–07) and «takings of the given» immune to doubt.

On the other hand, there seem to be propositions that are true on the sole basis of understanding them, nets of necessary relations whose truth the agent is able to directly and immediately apprehend. Think of self-evident propositions of a very simple nature. It is plausible to claim that there is no difference between one's understanding of a simple necessary truth and one's understanding that the intrinsic content that one so understands must be, and so is true. It is also plausible to claim that such apprehensions are operations of a faculty —*intuitive reason*— the deliverances of which are (at least to a high degree) independent of the epistemic quality of medium and environment so that a sceptical scenario that dooms the non-accidentality condition would not clearly apply to clear and distinct intuitions. The only way to generate such an extreme scepticism would thus seem to be by disguising as beliefs that come from intuitive reason beliefs that in fact are formed by unreliable processes.

The previous considerations provide a rationale for Schaffer's debasing demon. However, they also stop in its tracks his project of an extended demonology that would be able to increase tenfold the basis for universal doubt. This brings to the light a fundamental tension that permeates Schaffer's whole proposal, but more importantly, it leaves the debasing demon argument hanging by a thread, that is to say, it leaves it resting on the sole basis of a kind of deception that is far from plausible.

By isolating the beliefs of his victims from experience, the debasing demon creates a system of free-floating beliefs, one that could so easily be based on

improper processes as to be the ad hoc creation of the unlimited and all-powerful demon. Let us consider how plausible this picture is, or even if it is intelligible at all.

Does the debasing demon imperil the *cogito*? The idea would be that the demon's victim holds a belief about his thinking and his existence such that, although its contents are true, its epistemic status would fall short of knowledge. The trouble is that this approach presupposes that the *cogito* is a piece of *representational knowledge* that having an act-object analysis, could conceivably fail to represent its object properly. Such interpretation of the *cogito* is, from Descartes onwards, emphatically rejected.<sup>3</sup> The point is that even the debasing demon's victims have immediate access to their beliefs, and so, to the facts that they are conceiving the possibility of an omnipotent demon, judging that their beliefs are properly based, considering what the consequences of Schaffer's argument would be, etc. The epistemic status of the victims' beliefs being irrelevant to the subject's apprehension of his holding of those beliefs, and the *cogito* being nothing else than this direct apprehension, there is no intelligible way to be wrong about one's believing and existing. This means that «I am judging» is not the content of a judgment, and that since the source of the *cogito* is the *final stage* of the process from which knowledge arises (belief itself), it makes no sense to raise a doubt upon the *cogito* by dooming some *non-final* stage of the process (basing) on which the *cogito* could never be based. This is just to say that the very conditions that make the demon hypothesis possible (his victims' beliefs) are exempt from doubt, and thus, that, the *cogito* being built into the sceptical scenario itself, the very conditions for the possibility of the debasing demon make a universal doubt impossible. Experience-belief mechanisms just do not count for rendering an epistemic appraisal of the *cogito*.<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned above, Schaffer is, against his explicit claims, necessarily committed to the view that all demons are universal demons. The reason for

<sup>3</sup> As it is forcefully expressed by Robert Imlay in his classical paper on the Cartesian Circle: «This is because Descartes is convinced from the start that an idea of any given mode of thought, say doubting is indistinguishable from the doubting itself. As a result, to doubt that one is doubting is identical with one's actually doubting» (Imlay 1973, p. 24).

<sup>4</sup> Another way of putting the same point is by noting that even although it might be actually false that I am having a visual experience, it is an indubitable fact that it seems to me that I am having it. Those seemings are thoughts from which I cannot detach myself. They are formal acts of thinking that are invulnerable to the universal doubt. Their contents could be false, and yet it could not be false that I am holding a belief about such an experience.

this commitment is now clear. Given that demons operate by dooming some non-final stage of the process from which knowledge arises, it would be enough to select the proper source (introspection, intuitive understanding) and pick up *any* non-final stage in the process that a demon could threaten, for generating a doubt on mental states and operations. Demons would thus be distinguished by the conditions each demon dooms, but not by the scope of their respective powers. This explains why Schaffer vacillates in depriving the Cartesian demon of unlimited powers. The problem is that to overcome the intrinsic limitations of the Cartesian doubt, Schaffer also needs to upgrade the debasing demon, something that cannot be done just by a fiat. This results in an argument that is incoherent at its deepest level, and that falls prey to the very considerations that prevent the Cartesian demon from raising a universal doubt.

Notice, in this respect, that the problem of the subject's access to his beliefs in relation to which the coherence of scepticism has to be assessed could be plausibly extended to most of our experience so as to include within the domain of the self-presenting regions of passivity that go well beyond the region of activity proper of judgmental beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

My suggestion above was that an intrinsic part of having any occurrent belief is being immediately aware both of its propositional content and of the assertoric attitude that one has towards that content when believing. This is precisely what makes the *cogito* immune to doubt: the kind of awareness that Sosa calls «constitutive awareness» (Sosa 2015, p. 198). Notice, however, that this awareness is a *constituent feature of the belief itself* so that to be consciously given, our belief-awareness can neither be mistaken with the *reflective and second-order awareness* that, having a first-order belief as its object, is a distinct state from the state that is its object, nor made dependent on reflective (or noticing) awareness. We are aware of our beliefs simply by virtue of having them. Otherwise, we would have to explain belief-awareness by postulating a higher-order belief that, while deprived of constitutive awareness, would confer awareness to the first-order belief. The problem of this view —famously advanced by David Rosenthal (*cf.* Rosenthal 1986, pp. 329–59)— is that either it escalates into an infinite chain of simultaneous higher-order beliefs or it stops the regress at the cost of losing consciousness so that it does not so much explain belief-awareness as it explains it away.

The same considerations that apply to our access to beliefs also apply to

<sup>5</sup> I am borrowing this from the ideas on which Sosa elaborates in chapter nine of *Judgment and Agency* (*cf.* Sosa, 2015, pp. 192–212).

experiences in general. For one thing, there is all the difference in the world between experiencing something (a pain, a visual image, an act of understanding, etc.) and having a reflective belief that such an experiencing has occurred—a difference such as to make the claim that one is aware of his experiences as such by holding a belief about being in such state highly implausible. The point is that one is not *indirectly* aware of experiencing an experience, that one does not experience pain as if it were the pain of other.<sup>6</sup> For another, and although the contents of experiences can be epistemically evaluated in terms of whether they represent or misrepresent the things they are of, they function as proper foundations for beliefs independently of whether they are flawed or not. The point is that experiences are given as beliefs are given, not as objects of higher-order beliefs, but, as it were, *in themselves*. It follows that it is as absurd to cast doubt upon the intrinsic character of experiences (upon experiencing in a certain way) as to postulate a gap between the demon's victim and the beliefs on which the latter is wrong.

It eludes me how the phenomenal content of beliefs can be acquired without a direct acquaintance with the experience itself; as well as it eludes me how it is possible that, after making available a proper basis to his victims in order to disguise his manipulation, the debasing demon could still be dooming his victims' knowledge.<sup>7</sup> The point is that the debasing demon cannot erase the traces of his manipulation without providing his victims with a proper basing for their beliefs. Schaffer is thus caught in a dilemma with no solution. If the manipulation is introspectively detectable by the victims, they always can avoid deception by withholding judgment. If the manipulation is undetectable, that is because the victims have access to a proper source on which to justify their beliefs, in such a way that, coming to believe on a proper basis, their beliefs are no longer debased and the victims are no longer deprived of knowledge. Debasing and disguising are thus incompatible. Absent an accidental connection of the sources of beliefs with the truth, the demon's victims acquire knowledge by the simple fact of being deceived. This is why, Schaffer's argument being incoherent, it does not even provide plausible reasons for

<sup>6</sup> Is it possible that one could believe that an episode of understanding is taking place in one's mind without one having such understanding? Can acts of understanding be extended? Can they be apprehended in an indirect way? Is not 'understanding' a mental state such that it is constitutively *in propria persona*?

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Bondy and Adam Carter (forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*) have forcibly argued for this point, on which is based their cogent case for the impossibility of the debasing demon.

universal doubt.

However, and for the sake of the argument only, let us grant Schaffer the possibility of the debasing demon. Does it follow the sceptical conclusion from such a possible demon?

To my mind, critics —Brueckner (2011), Ballantyne & Evans (2013), Conee (2015)— tread on firm ground when they unanimously assert that even under such conditions, the sceptical conclusion does not unproblematically follow.

The point would be that the sceptical conclusion would only follow from the possible debasing demon if one takes a peculiarly high demanding view regarding the connection between justification and truth, one according to which *epistemic justification logically entails infallible access to the truth*. On this view, one would not know that  $p$  unless one knew that  $p$  could not be possibly false (or, what is the same, unless one knew that  $p$  is not false in any of the possible worlds where one holds such belief). To know that  $p$ , one would have to rule out as metaphysically impossible every conceivable scenario that would either be incompatible with the truth of  $p$  or compatible with the falsity of  $p$ .

I take no stance on whether the KK principle on which Schaffer's argument depends is right or not. My point is only that absent good reasons for the KK principle, the argument is inconclusive. At this stage, nothing prevents a critic from plausibly denying that it is required for knowledge that we could rule out the debasing hypothesis either on the basis of the lower degrees of justification required for knowledge or on the grounds that the debasing demon is modally too distant from the actual world to count as a relevant alternative. Notice that, on this view, the debasing demon is not even able to generate a moderate doubt. Perceptual beliefs and memory outputs could actually be perfectly justified even although they would not be justified within a demon world. In sum, the debasing demon does not bridge the gap between the possible and the actual.

### §3. The occasionalist demon

Let us now move on to consider the occasionalist demon. Just notice that to be effective, this newest demon has to be able to overcome the two obstacles that prevent the debasing demon from getting off. It has to be a demon with limited powers, to wit, one that, leaving the domain of the self-presenting unscathed (a domain that provisionally includes two kinds of *mental states*: beliefs and experiences, and something that goes beyond the realm of the psychological:

*self-evident propositions*), it only imperils our knowledge of the external world. And it has to be a demon that plays epistemic havoc merely by being possible, namely, that is able to doom our actual knowledge in a *neutral* and *natural* way, with no implicit commitment to the KK principle and Cartesian notions of infallible justification. In this sense, the occasionalist demon should be such as to pull us to the KK principle (or, as we will see later, to a sceptical impasse that results from the discrepancy between the possession of knowledge and the rational attitude that the agent has to take towards knowledge) without presupposing it as the proper conduit to reach a sceptical conclusion. Let us begin with some basic concepts in the literature on dispositions.

According to the standard analysis of disposition ascriptions (the so-called Simple Counterfactual Analysis), a disposition ascription of the form «*o* has a disposition to *M* (when *S*)» is true if and only if the associated counterfactual conditional «If it were the case that *S*, *o* would *M*» is also true. Among the several cases of possible interferences that undermine the previous analysis, *mimics* are cases in which the disposition ascription is false even if its associated conditional is true (or, alternatively, mimics are cases in which, even if the disposition ascription happens to be true, this is not the reason that makes the associated conditional true). Contrary to what happens with finks, masks and antidotes,<sup>8</sup> that preventing the manifestation of a stipulated disposition, are such as to make the associated conditional false while the truth value of the disposition ascription is true, cases of mimicking count as situations where, due to constructive external interferences,<sup>9</sup> an object seems to have the relevant disposition when in fact either it has no disposition at all or, having such

<sup>8</sup> Masks and mimics were introduced in the literature about the conditional analysis of dispositions by Johnston (1992, pp. 232–3), who also refers to finkish dispositions by the name of *cases of altering* (1992, p. 232). Finkish dispositions are cases where the trigger for the manifestation also causes the dispositional base of the object to alter so that, for instance, a glass that was fragile before  $t_1$  does not shatter when stressed because it became hard at  $t_1$  through the good offices of a glass-friendly sorcerer. Unlike them, masks are interferers that prevent the manifestation to occur while the object retains its dispositional base. Masks thus undermine the Reformed Conditional Analysis that Lewis proposed to meet the challenge of finks (1997, pp. 143–58). As for mimics, these are cases where, despite the absence of the dispositional base, the subjunctive conditional is true. Mimics were introduced in the literature by Smith (1977, pp. 439–45). Antidotes are in all the relevant aspects analogous to masks. They were introduced by Bird (1998, pp. 227–34).

<sup>9</sup> The distinction between destructive and constructive interferences is due to Gabriele Contessa. Destructive interferences (finks, masks, and antidotes) imperil the ‘if’ side of the Simple Counterfactual Analysis, while constructive interferences (mimics) threaten the ‘only if’ side of it (*cf.* Contessa 2012, p. 403).

disposition, the conditional does not depend on the possession of such disposition for its truth.<sup>10</sup>

Mimics are made vivid and intuitive by paradigmatic cases, such as Sosa's Zapper-dependent dispositions (Sosa 2015, p. 23) and Benign Angels (Sosa 2015, p. 103). Now consider the following scenarios:

ZAPPER. An iron dumbbell is not intrinsically disposed to shatter into pieces when gently touches a normal solid surface. However, a hovering fiend has cast a spell that zaps the dumbbell at the moment of touching a surface, so that if the dumbbell were to touch a surface, it would be immediately annihilated.

BENIGN ANGEL. An epistemic agent is not intrinsically disposed to get it right on his perceptual belief that *p* when so believing. However, a benign angel has cast a spell that makes his perceptual belief true, so that if the agent were to believe that *p*, his belief would be immediately true.

Notice that both are cases in which an extrinsic factor manipulates the environment so that it creates the illusion that something (whether an object or an agent) has a disposition that it does not have in fact. Notice too that the inner structure (whether of object or agent) could easily be *causally operative* for the result to obtain so that, were the dumbbell made of another material, the hovering fiend would have never intervened. However, even in the latter case, we would never intuitively ascribe to the iron dumbbell a disposition to shatter. This means that it is not enough to confer dispositions to an object that some of its properties be part of the causal basis for the result to obtain. To confer dispositions, the properties and the behaviour of an object have to be related in the *right* way. And since causal variance is compatible with mimicking, a causal relation is not the kind of relation that is right. Notice, finally, that mimics are indistinguishable from normal cases so that they generate an epistemic problem—the *undetectability* problem—that is raised in terms of a contrast between two situations that have to be distinct while seeming exactly as the same situation. It goes without saying that in the case of mimics that affect epistemic competences the situation is both introspectively undetectable by the agent and externally undetectable by any possible spectator.

Let us focus on cognitive competences (virtues, powers, faculties) that virtue

<sup>10</sup> Mimics come in two varieties: as faking a competence that does not exist and as *veridical mimics* that replace a competence ready for manifestation. In the latter case, the success still counts as accidental.

epistemologists correctly consider as the innermost source of reliable epistemic dispositions.

Mimics have come to be prominent in recent literature about competences. However, the reason for this prominent position has mainly been the problem of *deviant causation* (Sosa 2015, p. 10).

According to the first versions of virtue epistemology, *S* knows that *p* when his belief that *p* is apt, while a belief is apt when the agent's competence is the *causal basis* that explains the accuracy (success) of his belief. This analysis falls prey, however, to counterexamples from cases where although the competence is causally operative for the success to obtain, the agent's cognitive success is not creditable to his competence. As we said above, mimics are cases such that one can intuitively appreciate that a causal relation is not enough to confer dispositions and a fortiori to confer proper epistemic dispositions (dispositions to get it right that *p*). It follows that to get knowledge, competence and success have to be related in a much stronger way. To capture the stronger connection that is required, Sosa has substituted a relation of *manifestation* for the previous relation of mere causation.

The thing is that, contrary to what happens in the philosophy of action and metaphysics, the undetectability problem that mimics raise has gone mainly unnoticed by recent epistemologists, as unnoticed as the potentially dangerous scepticism that could result from it.

There seem to be several reasons for that. On the one hand, mimics are considered cases of extrinsic manipulation. They are at best seen as freak occurrences and as exceptional and ad hoc situational factors that, not being a stable part of the background, are not relevant for knowledge ascriptions. The point is, thus, that mimics are remote possibilities not liable to occur so that, unable to threaten the safety of our beliefs, they are modally too distant to count as relevant alternatives. On the other hand, mimics being situational factors, they are unable to affect normal circumstances where the shape of the agent and the environmental situation for his epistemic performance are appropriate. In this sense, to raise a wide-ranging scepticism on the grounds of possible (or even occasional) mimics, it would be as absurd as to try to undermine all perceptual knowledge on the basis of the occasional deception of the senses. This is why to avoid counterexamples to the Simple Counterfactual Analysis of dispositions, it is usual to prefix the associated conditional with a *ceteris paribus* clause that qualifies its truth within the range of normal circumstances that are taken for granted and that maybe are not even able to be captured through



verbal formulas (Sosa 2015, p. 27). To sum up, although the presence of mimics would be (by stipulation) undetectable, they are too outlandish and too circumscribed occurrences to be seriously considered as a potential sceptical threat.

As far as they go, the previous considerations are sound. Nonetheless, I want to dig a bit deeper on this issue. My trouble is with understanding what a *stable background* to confer epistemic dispositions upon their competent agents is and how it contributes (if it contributes at all) to confer them, or, in other words, with elucidating whether epistemic dispositions depend for their truth on factors *extrinsic* to the agents, better said, on factors extrinsic to the competences that the agents exercise so that those dispositions are in part possessed in virtue of the actual constitution of the world within which the agents are located.

What the view that I am going to consider suggests is that *epistemic dispositions are never completely internal*, to wit, that although they are true in virtue of the character of the faculty on which they are hosted so that they cannot be acquired or lost unless the innermost competence on which they are based is also acquired or lost, they are also true in virtue of the nomic necessities that constitute the actual world, necessities that form the fixed background against which disposition ascriptions are evaluated and that function as nomic links (nomological facts) that connect faculties and dispositions, virtues and successful epistemic shots, the categorical properties and the behaviour of objects.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to underline that, according to this view, those necessities are *metaphysically contingent* so that they only constitute a limited set of possible worlds that includes among its members the *actual world*. A world is thus possible where the same cognitive mechanisms that, given the extant laws of nature, are (by hypothesis) non-accidentally connected with the truth, could either be accidentally connected with the truth or be non-accidentally connected with falsity. The point is, thus, that reliable epistemic dispositions are partly internal and partly external, to wit, that they can be lost under two different conditions: (i) a change in the innermost competence of the agent, and (ii) a change of the laws that regulate nature.

We are thus dealing with a view that combines the intuitive claim that a

<sup>11</sup> The classical (and, plausibly, the most detailed) formulation of this view is the one proposed by Armstrong (*cf.* 1997, pp. 220–62).

demon world (whether epistemically fortunate or not) is metaphysically possible and the claim that we are *not* living in such a world, to wit, that we are situated within a world where just happens that cognitive competences confer reliable dispositions upon their bearers. I assume that many virtue epistemologists would not find anything objectionable in such view. The problem is that with this assumption they have just invoked the occasionalist demon—a demon that is nothing else than the previous view under a more dramatic name.

Consider two scenarios closely related to the BENIGN ANGEL scenario:

CARTESIAN GOD.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that they host (what we would consider) cognitive virtues, human agents in  $W_{CG}$  are not intrinsically disposed to get it right on their perceptual beliefs when so believing. However, the omnipotent and benevolent God of the Cartesian lore has established a law of nature such that makes all human perceptual beliefs relative to a normal range of shapes and situations true. Thus, if any agent were to form a perceptual belief within the established range of shapes and situations, his belief would be immediately and regularly true.

LAWS OF NATURE. Despite the fact that they host (what we would consider) cognitive virtues, human agents in  $W_{LN}$  are not intrinsically disposed to get it right on their perceptual beliefs when so believing. However, it just happens to be the case that there is a law of nature such that all human perceptual beliefs relative to a given range of shapes and situations are true. Thus, if any agent were to form a belief within the appropriate range of shapes and situations, his belief would be immediately and regularly true.

Notice that both are cases in which either by the intervention of the Cartesian God or by a matter of pure chance there happens to be an extrinsic factor (a law) such as to make that the agent's act of trying to get right on  $p$  by believing that  $p$  is *followed* by a *regularly* successful hit on the mark of the truth so that the extrinsic factor creates the illusion that the agent has a reliable disposition that it does not have in fact. Notice too that although the agent's act of believing is *causally operative* for the result to obtain (it is an essential antecedent of

<sup>12</sup> This scenario is named after the doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths and the conception of an omnipotent God that underlies it that Descartes advanced in his letters to Mersenne of April–May 1630. However, it is plausible to claim either that Descartes ultimately abandoned those doctrines completely or that he qualified them such as to make them compatible with his rationalist views. Importantly, those doctrines constitute the metaphysical background for the deceiving God sceptical scenario.

successful action), we would never ascribe to him a reliable disposition. Notice, finally, that cases such as *CARTESIAN GOD* and *LAWS OF NATURE* are indistinguishable from (putative) cases where the disposition ascription would be true.

All this suggests that there is no relevant difference between the latter cases and paradigmatic cases of mimics such as *ZAPPER* and *BENIGN ANGEL*. The trouble is that, by hypothesis, our imaginary antagonist claims that since human agents could lose a reliable disposition while retaining their cognitive faculties—after all, it would be enough to lose an intrinsic disposition that the laws of nature were different from what they actually are—, *cognitive faculties alone would never modally confer reliable dispositions upon their bearers*. It follows that what the cases of *CARTESIAN GOD* and *LAWS OF NATURE* really describe is the actual world and our doomed epistemic condition within it.

Paradoxically, this means that if disposition ascriptions were true in virtue of the laws of nature, then there would be no true disposition ascription. It is just contradictory to claim that *S* hosts an intrinsic disposition to *M* while also claiming that dispositions depend for their truth on external grounds concerning *S*'s environment. Or, in other words, the virtue theorist that holds the belief that disposition ascriptions depend on external factors for their truth, it is also committed to claim that no disposition ascription is made true merely by the fact that the agent hosts the appropriate cognitive virtue (such possession would be a *necessary*, but *not a sufficient condition* for the truth of the disposition ascription), and thus, to the claim that virtues *on their own* do *never* (where 'never' should be interpreted modally, and not temporally) confer dispositions. This is just to claim that there is no difference between the actual world and the above cases of mimicking.

There is thus no plausible way to distinguish stable factors that, extrinsic to virtues, constitute the nomic necessities of the actual world from mimics of the traditional variety. If such were the case, it would be easy to see that a virtue epistemology committed to the view that a demon world (a mimic-world) such as the worlds described in *CARTESIAN GOD* and *LAWS OF NATURE* is possible, and thus to the view that epistemic dispositions are *actually* reliable by the grace of nature, would doom the non-accidentality condition for knowledge *in the actual world*, and so, that it would collapse into an extreme form of occasionalism. Since reliable dispositions would be accidentally connected with virtues, *they would not be dispositions at all*. We would actually live in a demon world. The point is, thus, that there is a contradiction between

claiming that reliable dispositions are true in virtue of the character of the competence in which they are hosted and claiming that they also depend for their truth on contingent factors that are extrinsic to the competence. For a success to be accidental, it is irrelevant whether it is accidental *relative to the actual constitution of the world* or whether it is accidental *because of the accidental constitution of the actual world*. Only virtues can confer the relevant reliable dispositions for getting knowledge.

The challenge for our supposed virtue theorist would thus be that of providing good reasons to claim that, precisely because cases such as CARTESIAN GOD and LAWS OF NATURE are cases of mimicking such as ZAPPER and BENIGN ANGEL are, they pose no serious sceptical threat. What could possibly be those reasons? It would be very tempting to think in the following terms:

Let us now consider what happens in the cases of ZAPPER and BENIGN ANGEL. A cognitive competence will be manifested in the success of our beliefs only under certain combinations of shapes and situations. It is thus required for the proper manifestation of a competence its being *relative to* a range of external factors. Mimics are thus cases in which the situation is not adequate for the proper manifestation of a competence. However, mimics do not deprive the agent of his *innermost competence*, namely, of his *intrinsic disposition* to get it right reliably enough on *p* when properly shaped and situated. Mimics only prevent the intrinsic reliable disposition from manifesting. In spite of mimics, it would still be true that there is a disposition on the part of the agent to get it right when believing under the proper combinations of shape and situation.

The same point is valid for CARTESIAN GOD and LAWS OF NATURE. Contrary to what is stipulated in the formulation of both cases, the very fact that human agents host cognitive virtues in those worlds confer to them *intrinsic reliable dispositions*. What happens is that those agents are so poorly situated that the illusion of the manifestation of such dispositions substitutes a real manifestation that the very circumstances that surround the performance prevent. This would mean that the scenarios are obviously constructed so as to stack the deck against our hypothetical virtue epistemologist and that since a fake manifestation is quite different from a bogus intrinsic disposition, the cases are based on the confusion between the conditions for the *manifestation* of the innermost cognitive competence —conditions that include situational factors— and the conditions for the *possession* of intrinsic dispositions —a possession that the subject retains even when poorly situated and that explains why it is intuitive

to claim that even an object that is weightless in outer space it retains its weight (Sosa, 2015, p. 27) or that objects do not lose their colours in pitch darkness—. The point would thus be that since the possibility of a demon world (a world where intrinsic dispositions are prevented from manifesting) is not a good reason to think that we actually are in such a world, such possibility is (as in the case of traditional mimics) too outlandish as to be relevant for knowledge ascriptions. The problem with the above reply is that it is completely misguided.

Let us begin with that which Sosa calls a *complete competence* (Sosa 2015, pp. 26–7). A complete competence can be properly attributed to *S* when, in certain combinations of shape and situation, his innermost competence is manifested in the success of his performance. This means that a complete competence is not thus a particular kind of competence (among others), but a *competence that is complete*, to wit, the right manifestation of a competence (or competences) relative to the results and their mode of production of interest for the describer. The situational factors loaded into the content and directedness of the innermost competence for their mutual manifestation as knowledge are part of the truth conditions for a complete competence.

However, the truth conditions of a complete competence do not apply to the *possession of innermost competences*, that is, to the possession of intrinsic dispositions that remain even if, the subject being poorly situated, he lacks a complete competence. This means that innermost competences depend for their truth on no external factors. In this sense, it would be right to distinguish the truth conditions for the *manifestation* of an intrinsic disposition from the truth conditions for disposition ascriptions. It seems clear, moreover, that, since intrinsic dispositions necessarily underlie their manifestations —there would not be a proper manifestation of an innermost competence if there were no innermost competence to be manifested—, the analysis of complete competences is parasitic on the analysis of innermost competences. This asymmetry makes clear that one cannot coherently be a full-fledged externalist regarding virtues and dispositions. Were the possession of intrinsic dispositions affected by external factors, there would not be dispositions at all.

And this is just the point of the occasionalist demon scenario. Far from preventing the manifestation of the innermost competence or from *disguising* such manifestation, the demon brings into question the very existence of reliable dispositions *by considering that a severance between the possession of cognitive faculties and the possession of reliable internal dispositions is possible, and so, that is a necessary fact*. The critic misses the point of the argument. The mistake lies in

interpreting the occasionalist demon scenario as a *mask* that prevents intrinsic dispositions from being manifested (or, alternatively, as a *mimic* that leaves intrinsic dispositions unscathed), when it is a special case of *mimicking*, one that is special because, unlike traditional mimics that create the illusion of manifestation without necessarily calling into question the existence of intrinsic dispositions,<sup>13</sup> it creates the illusion of an intrinsic disposition that the subject is far from having. The critic is thus dealing with demon worlds that have nothing to do with the world plagued by the occasionalist demon. He stipulates an intrinsic disposition whose content is borrowed from the extrinsic law that connects the nature and the behaviour of the agent. Thus, the intrinsic disposition is no disposition at all, but the stimulus and the occasional cause for the law to operate. Cognitive successes do not manifest competences when the places of the latter are occupied by ontological holes.

To sum up, one could only claim that a demon world is such that it prevents the innermost competence from manifesting if one also claims that the innermost competence does not depend for its truth on external factors. Since the critic denies the latter clause, he deprives himself of the only means to tame the occasionalist demon.

The point is that a virtue epistemologist is inherently committed, not only to accept that there are reliable internal dispositions and that those dispositions are not possessed in virtue of how the world happens to be regulated by factors extrinsic to their constituents, but to the claim that one is committed to such *ontological claims* to coherently endorse even a minimal realism about epistemic dispositions. Otherwise, by accepting that agents could possibly lose their reliable dispositions while retaining all their ontological properties, and thus, by making of virtues possibly, and thus actually idle, he would be implicitly reducing virtues to the status of *occasional causes*. And occasional causes are not even proper causes. Much less they are that which apt performances manifest and that makes knowledge possible at all.

<sup>13</sup> To appreciate this point, it is enough to note that the BENIGN ANGEL could easily create the illusion of the manifestation of a competence while his victim retains his innermost competence so that it would still be true that, absent the BENIGN ANGEL, the agent would have manifested a complete competence. In such a case, the interference would have the character of a mimic (it would disguise a fake manifestation as a genuine one) as well as the nature of a mask (it would prevent the genuine competence from being manifested).

#### §4. Is the occasionalist demon even possible?

Granted that the virtue epistemologist cannot coherently claim that the occasionalist demon is even metaphysically possible, the trouble is now whether there is some accessible reason to go beyond the conditional and therefore unsatisfactory conclusion that *if the occasionalist demon is not possible, then our beliefs are (under the right conditions) reliably formed*, a conclusion that leaves us in the same position of those people that, according to Sextus Empiricus, are looking for gold in a dark room full of golden objects, and that even although they systematically hit upon the gold, are unaware of it (M, 7, p. 52).

But, what exactly is the challenge? In the first place, notice that it is the view that cognitive dispositions are partially extrinsic that bridges the gap between the possible and the actual on which the sceptical argument is grounded. This means that if the binding of cognitive dispositions and cognitive performances were due to nomological facts —when if nomological links regulate one possible world they will regulate all possible worlds—, knowledge would be impossible. Notice, in the second place, that the point of the sceptic is not necessarily that the agent has to rule out a nomic picture of the world in order to properly know (something that would entail that the sceptic is committed to the KK principle), but that the agent (even if he knows) cannot properly *claim* that he knows: agents are not justified in such a claim due to the possibility that the nomic picture is true, and so that knowledge is impossible. The problem thus concerns the *rational stance* of the agent. Maybe real and robust dispositions are the basic furniture of knowledge. Maybe they are properly manifested in the relevant occasions. Even so, agents would suffer from a constitutive *blindness* to knowledge. The trouble with this blindness is that, contrary to what happens in cases where the sceptic raises scenarios so remote as to be unable to produce equipollence, the nomic hypothesis, far from being a ludicrous scenario, is epistemically *on a par* with the dispositional hypothesis. At the meta-order, equipollence supports the suspension of judgment. Thus, epistemic blindness cannot be mitigated. Even if systematically possessing knowledge, normal epistemic agents are rationally precluded to attribute knowledge to themselves (or to others).

Since dealing properly with this issue goes far beyond the goals of this article —not to say that it would need careful elaboration—, I will only make some broad indications in the following.

First, it strikes me that, since the claim that the occasionalist demon (the nomic hypothesis) is possible entails a full commitment to an *antirealist view of*

*dispositions*, and that few would be keen to deny that dispositions are real, the very consequences of such sceptical scenario make it highly unattractive. However, this is not only a remark about our intellectual preferences. The trouble is that antirealism represents the world as the work of utter chance, as a heap of disconnected events whose meaning, if any, is opaque, as a mere succession that deprived of *order* is all but intelligible. Schopenhauer called this imaginary view «a foolish piece of self-torture» (Schopenhauer 2006, p. 55). His point was that if the contents of a hypothesis that is *prima facie* intelligible are really unintelligible, the hypothesis makes no sense at all. When Descartes distinguished between a simulacrum of thought (a mere verbal activity) and a real act of thinking (AT VII, p. 233 / CSM II, p. 163), he made the same point as Schopenhauer did. If antirealism is deprived of an intelligible content, then any scenario from which antirealism follows also is deprived of meaning.

Besides, and as the previous remark suggests, there is something wrong in asking for an accessible reason to support the claim that, under the right combinations of shape and situation, successful epistemic performances are performances that manifest the innermost competence of the agent.

This requirement stems from the image of apt performances as the result of a *mechanism* that connects the innermost competence with the successful performance and thus, that relates the inner and the outer in a non-contingent way so as to make it possible to *empirically* distinguish successes that are creditable to the agent from successes due to accidental interferences. It is not only that there is no mediatory entity able to relate intrinsic dispositions and external successes in a stronger way than by causal variance, but that this model conceives disposition ascriptions as on the spectrum of empirical propositions, that is to say, as claims that, rationally supported and justified, can be intelligibly called into doubt. It is, therefore, as if we were *observationally related* to our competences and our performances —as if paradigmatic cases of disposition ascriptions had emerged «from some kind of ratiocination» (Wittgenstein 2004, § 475)—.

In my view, when Sosa emphasizes the *primitive* character of the relation of manifestation (Sosa 2015, p. 31), he is breaking the hold of the above picture. The point is that competences and their manifestations can never be captured by an epistemological investigation as phenomenal items, and therefore that they have to be primitively assumed as *hinges* whose collapsing would plunge everything into chaos. They are given to the agent in an immediate and criterion-less way. They are proto-phenomena that make our cognitive



practices possible. They are implicitly presupposed so as to make sense of our cognitive actions. As a matter of fact, it only makes sense discussing whether a particular case is a genuine example of the manifestation of a competence against the background of the logical givenness of apt performances. The empirical question only makes sense because *normally and regularly it makes no sense at all*, that is, because most of the cases are such that the manifestation of a competence is not (and cannot be) in question. The point is that when elucidating whether a successful belief is creditable to the agent we are not trying to determine how the success was produced, but to put it into a context such that *it makes no longer sense to see meaningfully the success as (possibly) accidental*. In this respect, the right combinations of shape and situation under which a competence is manifest are relevant for attributing a disposition to *S*, but not because they are the *inferential means* to the intrinsic disposition. On the contrary, they are relevant because they are *the medium* through which the aptness of the performance is immediately given to us.

The interesting point is, in my view, that Sosa replaces an empirical and observational model by a model that emphasizes the primitive and irreducible character of the relation between innermost competences and apt performances, a relation that lies at the very foundations of metaphysics. It goes without saying that, dispositions and their manifestation being akin to logical principles that have to stand fast to prevent our system of intelligibility to collapse, a doubt (whether empirical or global) upon them is hardly conceivable (if at all). This background of implicit assumptions is thus included within the domain of the self-presenting.

However, as it was said above, Descartes managed to raise *prima facie* intelligible doubts even upon the self-presenting nature of the *cogito*.<sup>14</sup> Should we be concerned about those hyperbolic and metaphysical doubts?

At the expense of making somewhat oracular claims, let us just say that, for Descartes, those universal doubts are raised by entertaining a metaphysical possibility—that there might have been nothing—that he later manages to rule out as nonsensical. The point is that since a true proposition is true of something, it makes no sense to think of a proposition that is true of nothing. Analogously, the *radical contingentist* that endorses an antirealist view about dispositions would be *inherently committed* to the very hypothesis that Descartes ruled out as absurd so that the occasionalist demon is so metaphysically

<sup>14</sup> For a classical defence of this view, see Gewirth (1941, pp. 368–95).

entangled as to be vulnerable.<sup>15</sup>

I take no definitive stance on whether Descartes' strategy is effective (although I think that is highly promising). My only point is that, at the end of the day, the occasionalist demon has emerged as one more of the *universal demons* that populate Schaffer's epistemic hell; demons that by casting doubts over the very conditions for the *meaningfulness of the discourse* on which they are grounded, are self-undermining or self-refuting.

His strength is thus his weakness. Sooner or later, an epistemic policy of universal rejection is doomed to reach a point where it fails to attain universal success.

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<sup>15</sup> Radical contingentism is one of the marks of Lewisian non-localized possibilities. As such, it has become the Achilles' heel of Lewisian modalities. For an argument with important points in common with the Cartesian one, see Pruss (2002, pp. 317–33).

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