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Skepticism and Contextualism

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Introduction

According to some powerful skeptical arguments, we know almost nothing. Contextualist theories of knowledge ascriptions have been developed with an eye toward resisting skepticism. Have the contextualists succeeded? After briefly outlining their view, I will consider whether contextualism about knowledge ascriptions provides a satisfactory response to one of the most popular and influential forms of skepticism. I conclude with some questions for the contextualist. As we'll see, the effectiveness of the contextualist solution to skepticism is far from settled.

1. What is Epistemic Contextualism?

“Contextualism” is an umbrella term for a variety of views, both inside epistemology and out. In epistemology, the most widely discussed version of contextualism is the view that knowledge-talk is context sensitive. According to this view, the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions (e.g. “S knows that p ”) and knowledge denials (e.g. “S doesn't know that p ”) vary depending on the context in which they are uttered (Cohen 1988; DeRose 1995; Lewis 1996). In what follows, I will be considering this type of contextualism.¹

Let me start with a few clarifications. “Context” here means the conversational setting that is determined by speaker intentions, listener expectations, presuppositions in the conversation, and salience relations—what David Lewis calls the “conversational score” (Lewis 1979). What varies with context is the epistemic standard that a person S must meet in order to count as “knowing” some proposition p . Contextualists differ as to whether epistemic standards are a matter of the extent of relevant alternatives that need to

¹ This view differs from the sort of contextualism defended by Annis (1978) and Williams (1991). Pritchard (2002) discusses different types of contextualism. One might also be a contextualist about epistemic terms other than knowledge, such as certainty, justification, evidence, reliability, or understanding. My focus is strictly on knowledge.

be considered (e.g. Cohen 1988; Lewis 1996), the range of possible worlds in which the truth is tracked (e.g. DeRose 1995), or something else. They also disagree about the specific semantic character of “know” (e.g. indexical, vague, gradable, etc.). We can safely ignore these in-house disputes. What matters for our purpose is the following core feature of contextualism: there will be some contexts in which “S knows that p ” requires for its truth that S have a true belief that p and meet a very high epistemic standard, while in other contexts an utterance of the very same sentence may require only that S meet some lower epistemic standard for its truth, in addition to S’s truly believing that p . Put differently, what is expressed in certain contexts is that S knows that p relative to a low standard, and what is expressed in other contexts is that S knows that p relative to a high standard.²

The merits of this view are hotly debated in epistemology. My aim in this chapter is not to determine the plausibility of contextualist thesis that “knows” is context sensitive—that is a large and complicated task to which this entire Handbook is a significant contribution. My goal, rather, is to evaluate the contextualist’s solution to the problem of skepticism.³ Perhaps the main virtue of contextualism is that it can allegedly solve the skeptical problem, and it is largely for this reason that contextualism has gained center stage in epistemology.

2. Skepticism

Skepticism takes many forms. Here I will focus on just one type of skepticism, albeit one that is both historically significant and widely discussed in recent epistemology:

Cartesian skepticism.

Cartesian skeptical arguments are characterized by their use of “skeptical hypotheses,” which describe undetectable cognitively debilitating states such as dreaming, hallucination, or victimization by an evil demon. Roughly, a hypothesis is “skeptical” if (a) its truth is inconsistent with some propositions we ordinarily take ourselves to know, and yet (b) the hypothesis is compatible with all our experience in favor of those ordinary propositions. To illustrate, consider the following brain-in-a-vat version of the skeptic’s argument:

1. I don’t know that I am not a handless brain in a vat.
2. If I don’t know that I am not a handless brain in a vat, then I don’t know that I have hands.
3. Therefore, I don’t know that I have hands.

² This is a harmless simplification. Contextualists do not think there are just two standards governing the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions (contra Malcolm 1952), but rather a wide variety (DeRose 1999). Elsewhere I have argued that “knows” is not a variable as contextualists typically claim (Hannon 2015).

³ The contextualist solution to skepticism would be implausible if contextualism were an incorrect account of the semantics of how we use the verb “know” in daily life. Thus, the primary grounds for contextualism must come from our knowledge-attributing (and knowledge-denying) behavior in ordinary, non-philosophical talk (DeRose 2009: 47). See ch. 2.

Although Descartes never mentions brains in vats, the origin of this argument can be traced to his *Meditations*, if not earlier. Many contemporary epistemologists, such as Keith DeRose (1995), Stephen Schiffer (1996), and Stewart Cohen (1999), provide essentially the same formulation of skepticism. Suitably articulated, the skeptic's argument will lead us to deny much of our putative knowledge of the world around us.

By extrapolating away from the details, we can provide a more general formulation of skepticism. For simplicity, let's say that *O* represents some ordinary proposition about the external world that we intuitively know (e.g. I have hands) and *SH* represents a suitably chosen skeptical hypothesis that is inconsistent with *O* (e.g. I am a handless brain in a vat). The general structure of the skeptic's argument is:

1. I don't know that not-*SH*.
2. If I don't know that not-*SH*, then I don't know that *O*.
3. Therefore, I don't know that *O*.

Let's call this simple version *the skeptic's argument*. DeRose thinks this argument is "clearly valid... and each of its premises, considered on its own, enjoys a good deal of intuitive support" (1999: 2-3). Cohen agrees that "both of these premises are intuitively quite appealing" (1999: 62).

The first premise is defended on the grounds that however unlikely or strange it might seem to suppose that I am in a skeptical scenario, it also seems true that I do *not* know that I am not in one—as DeRose says, "how *could* I know such a thing?" (1995: 2). Further, if I don't know whether or not I am in a skeptical scenario, then it seems that I do not know many things about the world around me. This claim derives its force from the notion that knowledge transfers across known entailments, and hence that some sort of closure principle holds for knowledge. Roughly: if you know one proposition and know that that proposition entails another, then you know the latter proposition. If we do not know the falsity of a skeptical scenario, however, then we can derive a skeptical result from the closure principle in the following way: if we know that *O*, then we know that not-*SH*; but we don't know that not-*SH*, so we don't know that *O*.

While there are some problems involved in finding a satisfactory articulation of the closure principle, the idea that knowledge is closed under known logical implication is widely accepted.⁴ Denying this principle would license what DeRose calls "abominable conjunctions" (1995: 27-9). An example of an abominable conjunction is: "I know where my car is parked, but I don't know whether it has been stolen and moved." Another example is: "I know that I have hands, but I don't know that I'm not a handless brain in a vat." I will assume that some version of the closure principle holds.⁵

The skeptic's argument looks valid and its premises are intuitively plausible. The problem is that the skeptic's conclusion seems false: it conflicts with our compelling

⁴ See Hawthorne (2004) for a discussion of the closure principle. The proposal that we should resolve skeptical worries by rejecting closure has been criticized by Lewis (1996: 564), Vogel (1990: 13), Cohen (1988: 105), Feldman (1995: 487), Schiffer (1996: 320), DeRose (2009: 29), and many others. In contrast, Nozick (1981), Dretske (1970), and Heller (1999) have denied closure.

⁵ Ch. 12 gives a related discussion of closure and contextualism.

belief that we *do* have all sorts of everyday knowledge. To doubt that we have such knowledge seems absurd—at least, to doubt it in any serious and lasting way. As Lewis puts it, “It is a Moorean fact that we know a lot. It is one of those things that we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary” (1996: 549). The result is a paradox:

1. We have all sorts of everyday knowledge.
2. We don’t know that we’re not in a skeptical scenario.
3. If we don’t know that we’re not in a skeptical scenario, then we don’t have all sorts of everyday knowledge.

This is a paradox because each of these jointly inconsistent propositions seems true. In order to escape the paradox, something has to give—but what and why?

At first blush it might look as if there are only three ways out of this paradox:

- (a) *Deny closure*: reject the idea that if S knows that p and S knows that p entails q , then S knows that q .
- (b) *Concession*: concede that we do not know most (or all) of what we thought we knew.
- (c) *Dogmatism*: maintain that we do know that we are not victims of a skeptical scenario.

None of these options is immediately appealing. I have already suggested that knowledge remains closed under known logical implication, so let’s set (a) aside. Option (b) would allow the skeptic to rob us of our knowledge, while (c) seems groundless and even question begging.⁶ A successful solution to the paradox must not just deny one of the three inconsistent propositions, it must also explain why we thought each proposition was true. In other words, a successful solution must explain why we thought there was a paradox in the first place.

This is just what contextualists allege they can do. The next section will explain how the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions is supposed to resolve the skeptical paradox.

3. The Contextualist Solution to Skepticism

While contextualist theories differ in their details (see Rysiew 2007: §3.3), the contextualist solution to skepticism involves two basic elements: first, the contextualist claims that in ordinary contexts we often speak truly when we ascribe “knowledge” to others; second, in certain other contexts, such as those in which skepticism is seriously considered, the epistemic standards required to merit a knowledge ascription are much higher, and as a result speakers will deny “knowledge” with equal propriety and truth. The conditions for applying “knows” differ depending on the context we are in. This

⁶ Moore (1939) famously defended this strategy.

variation makes it possible for us to speak truly when we say “S knows that *p*” in contexts with low standards (e.g. “ordinary contexts”), even though we would speak falsely when uttering the same sentence in contexts with higher standards (e.g. “skeptical contexts”).

But how does the skeptic create a context in which we can no longer truthfully say that we know many things? Contextualists disagree about how the standards get raised, including whether they *are* raised by merely considering skepticism.⁷ I will return to this question in §4. For now, I’ll simply adopt the common contextualist idea that the standards for “knowledge” are raised as moves in the conversation make salient various skeptical possibilities (Cohen 1988; DeRose 1995; Lewis 1996).⁸ For example, if the skeptic makes salient the possibility that we are brains in vats and we recognize that we cannot rule out this possibility, then we can no longer truthfully utter “I know that I have hands.” This is because the operative standard now requires us to eliminate the possibility that we are handless brains in vats (which, presumably, we cannot do) in order to count as “knowing.”

Contextualism allows us to escape the skeptical paradox in the following way. Although it initially seemed as though we were facing three mutually inconsistent propositions, the contextualist argues that these propositions aren’t really inconsistent. When we ordinarily claim to “know” things what we mean is, roughly, that we know *relative to ordinary standards*. When faced with a skeptical challenge, however, what we mean is, roughly, that we don’t know *relative to high standards*. We are first asserting one proposition and then denying another proposition, although both are expressed by the same words. The meaning of “know” shifts. But as long as the relevant contexts prescribe different standards, we do not logically contradict ourselves when uttering, in one context, “I know that I have hands,” while uttering, in another context, “I don’t know that I have hands.” In ordinary contexts, the former claim is true and the latter claim is false; in skeptical contexts, the latter claim is true and the former is false.⁹

Why, then, did it *seem* as though there was a paradox? If the skeptic is not really denying what we have been asserting all along, why are we puzzled by skeptical arguments?

⁷ There is also a debate about whether the skeptic speaks *truthfully* when she attempts to impose higher standards. Suppose the skeptic is met with an “Aw, come on!” response from her listener, who continues to insist that he has knowledge. Who is speaking the truth? Contextualists often write as if the skeptic speaks truthfully in such a context (Lewis 1979: 355; DeRose 1995). Others have assumed that *both* the skeptic and her opponent are speaking the truth. DeRose (2004), however, rejects both of these views. On his view, neither the skeptic nor her opponent is speaking truthfully as they argue. Rather, both parties are making claims that are neither true nor false. For criticisms of this view, see Feldman (2004) and Gottschling (2004).

⁸ Although I will focus on salience (because it seems most relevant to skepticism), epistemic standards might also shift as a result of *practical interests* (Stanley 2005; Fantl and McGrath 2002). Consequently, what it takes to “know” that *p* might go up if it is very important for one to have a true belief that *p*.

⁹ The contextualist avoids rejecting the closure principle by contextualizing it: If X satisfies “knows *O*” in context C and satisfies “knows that *O* entails *P*” in C, then X satisfies “knows *P*” in C (Blome-Tillmann forthcoming). This metalinguistic version says that the non-contextualized closure principle expresses a truth as long as the conversational context is fixed.

The answer is that we do not fully recognize the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions. The contextualist is therefore committed to positing a degree of “semantic ignorance” (Schiffer 1996; Hawthorne 2004). We are ignorant of what we are really saying, and what the skeptic is saying, which misleads us into thinking the skeptic’s conclusion is incompatible with our claims to “know” a variety of things. Contextualism thus combines a view about the semantics of knowledge ascriptions with an *error theory* according to which competent speakers are systematically misled by contextualist semantics (DeRose 1995: 40-1; Cohen 1999: 77).¹⁰

4. Objections and Replies

The contextualist solution to skepticism has been touted as a major merit of the theory. However, this solution has been widely criticized. In this section, I will discuss several objections to the contextualist solution to skepticism.

Is Contextualism Too Skeptic-Friendly?

One of the most common objections to contextualism is that it is too concessive to the skeptic. There are several ways to interpret this objection.¹¹ The most common interpretation is that contextualism is too skeptic-friendly because as soon as skepticism is mentioned, participants in the conversation can no longer truthfully claim to have “knowledge.” In other words, merely mentioning the possibility that we are brains in vats would be enough to cause a dramatic upward shift in epistemic standards. Many, however, find it implausible that the skeptic wins every argument simply by mentioning a skeptical scenario (Schiffer 1996; Feldman 1999; Barke 2004; Brendel 2005; Willaschek 2007).

This objection is closely related to a second one, namely, that epistemological contexts are inevitably skeptical contexts (Feldman 2001; Pritchard 2002; Brueckner 2004). Lewis writes,

Do some epistemology. Let your fantasies rip... In such an extraordinary context, with such a rich domain, it never can happen (well, hardly ever) that an ascription of knowledge is true. (Lewis 1996: 559)

Why think epistemological contexts are inevitably skeptical? Because when we engage in epistemology, we routinely attend to skeptical possibilities. This allegedly creates a conversational context in which high epistemic standards prevail, so uttering “I know that I have hands” will, in this context, express the false proposition that one knows this *relative to high standards* (Schiffer 1996: 321).

¹⁰ One of the most important objections to contextualism is that semantic ignorance is implausible in the case of knowledge (see Schiffer 1996; Feldman 1999; Hofweber 1999; Rysiew 2001; Pritchard 2002; Davis 2004; Hawthorne 2004; Bach 2005; Conee 2005; Williamson 2005; Stanley 2005). A number of contextualists have replied to this objection (Neta 2003; Cohen 2005; DeRose 2009; Blome-Tillmann 2014). Unfortunately, I do not have space to discuss it here.

¹¹ Here I draw on Montminy (2008).

Another consequence is that contextualists cannot claim to know the truth of their own thesis, for any discussion of contextualism must take place within a skeptical context. Fogelin (2000) says the contextualist cannot tell his story out loud (so to speak) without calling attention to the very things that undercut his story—i.e., skeptical possibilities. Thus, the contextualist cannot expound his view without succumbing to “the incoherence of attempting to eff the ineffable” (Fogelin 2000: 55).

Further, contextualism allegedly produces the curious result that we can never truthfully say, or even *think*, that we know that we are not brains in vats, since any consideration of this possibility automatically raises the epistemic standards (Schiffer 1996: 321; Davis 2004: 260; Engel 2004: 212).

¹² Thus, while contextualists claim that in certain contexts we *do* know (relative to low standards) that we’re not brains in vats, we can never truthfully utter this, or even think it. The *only* proposition expressible by an utterance of “I know that I’m not a brain in a vat” is the false proposition that one knows that one is not a brain in a vat relative to high standards. But many regard unspeakable and unthinkable knowledge to be a very peculiar form of knowledge. More drastically, Feldman (2001: 72) claims that the contextualist, in his context, cannot truthfully say (or think) that we know *anything* about the world around us.

A final way in which contextualism has been regarded as too concessive is this: the less we reflect on our knowledge, the more we seem to know (Engel 2004). The flip side is that the more we reflect on our knowledge, the less knowledge we have (Brendel and Jäger 2004: 150). Consider the following remark by Lewis:

Maybe epistemology is the culprit. Maybe this extraordinary pastime robs us of our knowledge. Maybe we do know a lot in daily life; but maybe when we look hard at our knowledge, it goes away... Then epistemology would be an investigation that destroys its own subject matter. (Lewis 1996: 550)

Lewis goes on to say that “knowledge is elusive,” it “vanishes” because epistemology plunges us into skeptical contexts (1996: 559, 560). This is an unsavory result.

A common response to these objections is that not every context in which skepticism is discussed is a skeptical context (DeRose 2000: 94-5; Montminy 2008: 4; Ichikawa 2011: 388; Blome-Tillmann 2014: 36). Simply making S aware of a skeptical defeater is not sufficient to effect a change of an epistemic context with respect to S knowing that *p*. For example, imagine a jury that must decide whether Jones shot Smith. In their deliberations, the jury members may properly ignore the following possibility, even if it were mentioned by the defense lawyer in a desperate, last-ditch effort to save his client: “Ladies and gentlemen, I must point out that the prosecutor has failed to rule out the possibility that it was not Jones who fired the fatal shot but rather there is an evil demon deceiving us!” Some possibilities may be properly ignored even when the stakes are high.

¹² This seems implied by DeRose’s ‘Rule of Sensitivity’ (1995: 36), although DeRose is careful to say that the standards for knowledge *tend* to raise when a person asserts that he does (or does not) know that he’s not a brain in a vat.

Although Lewis (1996: 559) suggests that mentioning a skeptical hypothesis will put in place very high epistemic standards, contextualists are not committed to this view. Contexts are not hostage to whatever “moves” are made by conversational participants. Thus, the skeptic would not win every argument by merely drawing attention to a previously unacknowledged skeptical defeater, nor would epistemology automatically place us in a skeptical context. Contextualists needn’t accept the ‘skeptical-friendly’ assumption that philosophical discussions of skepticism are governed by exceedingly high epistemic standards (DeRose 2009).

What, then, should the contextualist say about the mechanisms that cause a shift in the epistemic standards? A plausible idea is that to drive up the standards a skeptical possibility must not only be *mentioned* but also *taken seriously* by participants in the context. DeRose shows some sympathy for this view. He says that one’s conversational partner must “get away” with making a skeptical possibility relevant in order to raise the standard (DeRose 1995: 14, fn.21). Blome-Tillmann (2014) also claims that skeptical standards do not prevail in every context in which they are mentioned. On his view, whether a context of epistemological discussion is governed by high standards depends on what the speakers in the discussion pragmatically presuppose.¹³ If epistemologists are pragmatically presupposing they are not brains in vats, then contexts of epistemological inquiry are not necessarily skeptical (Blome-Tillmann 2014: 53). Blome-Tillmann argues that speakers “can, to a certain extent, voluntarily decide what they take seriously and which propositions they presuppose, they have, to a certain extent, voluntary control over the content of ‘know’ in their contexts” (2014: 21). Thus, we can remain in a context in which we satisfy “know” even though the skeptic has drawn our attention to brains in vats.¹⁴

As we’ve seen, contextualists are not committed to the view that the epistemic standards skyrocket as soon as skepticism is mentioned. Consequently, they may reject the claim that epistemology is a context in which we rarely, if ever, meet the conditions to satisfy “knows *p*.” From this it follows that contextualists can state their view without risking incoherence. As Montminy remarks, “contextualists need not embrace the skeptic’s high standards; they simply need to point out that such standards are sometimes adopted by speakers” (2008: 6).

Now let’s return to the question of whether epistemology robs us of our knowledge. This can be interpreted in two ways. On one interpretation, the amount of knowledge we have decreases when the epistemic standards go up (and increases when the standards go down). We literally lose and gain knowledge as the standards shift. Strictly speaking, however, contextualism does not entail that any knowledge is lost. Contextualism is a

¹³ S pragmatically presupposes *p* in context C iff S is disposed to behave, in her use of language, as if she believed *p* to be common ground in C (Blome-Tillmann 2014: 26). It is “common ground” that *p* in a group G iff all members of G *accept* (for the purpose of the conversation) that *p*, and all *believe* that all accept that *p*, and all *believe* that all *believe* that all accept that *p*, etc. (*ibid*: 23).

¹⁴ But what happens if, in a conversation, the skeptic refuses to pragmatically presuppose that we are not brains in vats? Blome-Tillmann says we are in a *defective context* (2014: 43-5). In such contexts, it is unclear whether we satisfy “knows” (or if epistemicism isn’t your preferred theory of vagueness, there is a truth-value gap). This view is similar to DeRose (2004).

thesis about the truth conditions of knowledge sentences. On this view, it is true that a conscientious epistemologist, who strives to envisage all sorts of error possibilities, *cannot*, in her context, truthfully claim to “know” that she has hands. It is also true that a naïve person, in an ordinary context, *can* truthfully claim to “know” that he has hands. However, the naïve person is *not* in a better epistemic position than that of the epistemologist. Both people “know” they have hands relative to low standards and both do not “know” this relative to high standards. What contextualists investigate is how the knowledge claims made by these people are to be understood (Montminy 2008: 6). The conscientious investigator says something true when she utters “I don’t know that *p*,” since by that utterance she expresses the proposition that she does not know that *p* relative to high standards; and the naïve person says something true when he says “I know that *p*,” since by that utterance he means that he “knows” that *p* relative to low standards.

On the second interpretation, epistemology “robs” us of our knowledge because we tend to speak *falsely* whenever we say that we “know” things in epistemological contexts. But I have argued that epistemology does not automatically plunge us into a skeptical context, so the sentence “No one knows anything” is not made true as easily as opponents to contextualism have suggested. This at least weakens the force of this objection, even if it does not remove it entirely.

Is Contextualism Irrelevant to Epistemology?

Several philosophers who grant the truth of contextualism nevertheless doubt that contextualism is of any relevance to epistemology (Klein 2000; Sosa 2000; Feldman 2001). I will discuss two interpretations of this objection. The most common version of this objection is nicely expressed by DeRose:

[Contextualism] has been known to give rise to the following type of outburst: ‘Your contextualism isn’t a theory about *knowledge* at all; it’s just a theory about *knowledge attributions*. As such, it’s not a piece of epistemology at all, but of the philosophy of language.’ (DeRose 2009: 18)

Contextualism, as mentioned earlier, is a thesis about the truth conditions of knowledge sentences—it is *not* a thesis about knowledge itself. Thus, it is misleading to say, as many contextualists have said, that *whether one knows* depends on the context (Feldman 2004: 25; Bach 2005: 54-5). It is more accurate to say that whether a sentence of the form “S knows that *p*” is true depends on the context. But if the focus of contextualism is on knowledge ascriptions and not knowledge itself, then how, even if contextualism is true, could it shed light on skepticism? Isn’t skepticism about the extent of our *knowledge*?

Contextualists reject this characterization of their view (e.g. DeRose 2009: 18). Although they investigate the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions, contextualists do not regard themselves as engaged in a very different inquiry from that of traditional epistemologists. Rather, they take themselves to be addressing the traditional philosophical problem of skepticism. Contextualists believe they are bringing the relevant philosophy of language to bear on the same *epistemological* issue that others have

addressed in different ways. As DeRose writes, “To the extent that contextualism/invariantism is an issue in the philosophy of language, it’s a piece of philosophy of language that is of profound importance to epistemology” (2009: 18). This is because how we proceed in studying knowledge will be greatly affected by how we come down on the issue of whether or not contextualism is true. To illustrate this point, DeRose draws an analogy with the free will debate:

Those who work on the problem of free will and determinism should *of course* be very interested in the issue of what it means to call an action “free.” If that could mean different things in different contexts, then all sorts of problems could arise from a failure to recognize this shift in meaning. If there is no such shift, then that too will be vital information. In either case, one will want to know what such claims mean. (2009: 19)¹⁵

Similarly, if “know” expresses different propositions in different contexts, then many epistemological problems may arise due to our ignorance of this fact (*ibid*). Thus, it is important to discern what it means to say that someone “knows” something in order to properly investigate knowledge.¹⁶

Feldman (1999; 2001) proposes another way in which contextualism might be irrelevant to epistemology. He claims that contextualism *per se* does not allow us to resolve the skeptical puzzle because one might be a contextualist and yet maintain that the standards for “knowledge” never get low enough for us to meet them (i.e. you might be a contextualist *and a skeptic*); or you might think the standards for “knowledge” are never high enough to entail skepticism (i.e. the standards vary but only at a low level). Neither of these types of contextualism would resolve the skeptical problem and they would therefore be of limited significance to epistemology.

While Feldman’s point is true as far as it goes, the contextualist never claimed that *any* version of his view could resolve the skeptical challenge. Indeed, virtually every contextualist rejects the view that the standards for “knowledge” never get high enough to favor skepticism, since this view does not adequately explain our urge to deny “knowledge” when confronted with a skeptical challenge (and thus it would fail to explain part of the phenomena that motivated contextualism in the first place). Similarly, it would be implausible to defend a version of contextualism according to which the standards for “knowledge” never get low enough for us to meet them, for this view runs contrary to our everyday practice of ascribing knowledge. The most plausible version of contextualism is one where the standards for “knowledge” are often low enough to be met (thereby preserving the truth of our knowledge ascriptions in ordinary contexts), and

¹⁵ Robin McKenna suggests that the same analogy could actually illustrate the *irrelevance* of contextualism to epistemology. If the contextualist claim to solve the skeptical problem is like the claim that we can solve the debate between free will and determinism by pointing out that, in some contexts, “free” means something that is compatible with determinism (whereas, in other contexts, it doesn’t), then those unsatisfied by this approach to free will would be similarly unsatisfied with epistemic contextualism.

¹⁶ Sosa (2000) also questions the relevance of contextualism to epistemology. See Blome-Tillmann (2007) for a reply. See also ch. 9.

yet sometimes they get so high that they are rarely, if ever, met (thus explaining the pull of skepticism).

Does Contextualism Mischaracterize Skepticism?

According to some philosophers, contextualism does not shed much light on the problem of skepticism because the contextualist mischaracterizes the skeptic's position (Feldman 1999, 2001; Klein 2000; Kornblith 2000; Bach 2005; Ludlow 2005). More precisely, the contextualist improperly portrays the dispute between the non-skeptic and the skeptic as a difference between using laxer standards and stricter ones. In presenting her argument, however, the skeptic is not merely raising the standards for what it takes to "know." Rather, she is arguing that it is much tougher than we realized for a belief to qualify as knowledge *by ordinary standards* (Bach 2005: 68). The skeptic gets us to doubt whether we actually satisfy the same standards that we have always thought we satisfied, not merely some unattainably high standard (Feldman 1999, 2001; Klein 2000). In attempting to confine the plausibility of skeptical arguments to certain contexts, the contextualist ignores the fact that the skeptic purports to show that, contrary to common belief, ordinary knowledge attributions are generally false.

Kornblith (2000) makes a similar criticism. Central to his objection is a distinction between two types of skeptic: the Full-Blooded Skeptic and the High Standards Skeptic. The Full-Blooded Skeptic claims that "we are no more justified in believing that there is an external world than that there isn't," and that we "have no degree of justification whatever for [our] claims about the external world. None." (Kornblith 2000: 26). In contrast, the High Standards Skeptic is perfectly willing to grant there are differences in degree of justification that people have for their various beliefs about the external world; he simply denies that we ever reach some very high standard required for knowledge. Kornblith's main complaint is that the contextualist only answers the High Standards Skeptic, who is the far less interesting and worrying of the two.

Why is the High Standards Skeptic less interesting and worrying than the Full-Blooded Skeptic? It is because the former, but not the latter, is willing to acknowledge "the importance and accuracy of substantive epistemological distinctions that we wish to make" (Kornblith 2000: 27). The High Standards Skeptic will admit that I am far more justified in believing that I am currently sitting down and writing this paper than I am in believing that I am a handless brain in a vat. Consequently, it is easy to decide what to believe because there are widely varying degrees of justification for propositions about the world around us. The High Standards Skeptic denies that we ever reach the level of justification needed to call such beliefs "knowledge," but this is "a wholly trivial and uninteresting position", says Kornblith (2000: 27). He writes, "This is not, of course, the skepticism of Descartes' First Meditation; it is, instead, a much more modest and less exciting form of skepticism" (2000: 26). The real threat is the Full-Blooded Skeptic who insists that all propositions about the external world are epistemically on par. It is this skeptic who is allegedly making "a historically important and philosophically interesting claim", according to Kornblith (2000: 27), and yet contextualism does nothing to address this argument.

How might the contextualist reply? In response to the skeptic's claim that we lack knowledge even by ordinary standards, the contextualist might accuse the skeptic of *mistakenly believing* this because she is confused by semantic ignorance. Although the skeptic purports to show that, contrary to common belief, our knowledge claims have always been false, perhaps she is just wrongly assuming that knowledge ascriptions have invariant truth conditions, and in making this assumption she commits the fallacy of equivocation. If knowledge ascriptions really are context sensitive, then the skeptic is not actually denying what we thought we knew.¹⁷ Instead, she makes the same type of semantic confusion that we make when we worry about skeptical arguments. Both parties are partially semantically ignorant of what's really going on, so neither of us realizes the context has shifted.

I think there's an element of talking past each other here. Contextualism is supposed to be a descriptive thesis about how we use language, whereas skepticism isn't usually a descriptive thesis. The skeptic isn't making a point about how we use language but rather is making a point about how we *should* use language, or something like that. So it is hard to see why this contextualist response is fully satisfying.¹⁸

As far as I know, no contextualist has in print dealt with Kornblith's Full-Blooded Skeptic.¹⁹ Some anecdotal evidence suggests that many contextualists are not moved by this objection, but I'm not sure why. Perhaps it is because the skeptic is often portrayed as denying that we ever speak truly when, even in ordinary conversation, we claim to "know" things about the external world (see Stanley 2005: 82; Hawthorne 2004: 53; Davis 2007: 427; Rysiew 2007: 627). As DeRose (unpublished) points out, the skeptic of Descartes' First Meditation, whom Kornblith finds interesting, seems to be more like the High Standards Skeptic than the Full-Blooded Skeptic, contrary to Kornblith's own reading of Descartes. For example, Curley takes Descartes' conclusion to be: "None of my beliefs about ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity are certain" (1978: 52). This certainly isn't Full-Blooded Skepticism. Further, DeRose (1992) argues that Descartes' own description of the "atheist geometer" makes his skepticism look milder than even the High Standards Skeptic. The geometer has not escaped from the skepticism established in the first meditation, and yet Descartes says he can "know clearly" that the geometrical theorem is true (Descartes 1967: vol.2, 39). Thus, Kornblith's insinuation that Descartes is describing something more like the Full-Blooded Skeptic than the High Standards Skeptic seems false.

Perhaps another reason why contextualists have focused on the High Standards Skeptic is that he *is* more threatening than Kornblith suggests. If this skeptic were right, then we would speak falsely whenever we claim to "know" things about the external world. Kornblith says the truth of this claim would not be philosophically important news. However, the news that all our knowledge claims are false, including those made in ordinary conversation, certainly seems startling. "Know" is one of the 10 most

¹⁷ Does this reply beg the question? I will discuss this objection in the next sub-section.

¹⁸ Thanks to Robin McKenna here.

¹⁹ After I wrote this chapter, Keith DeRose told me that he provides a thorough reply to Kornblith in ch. 4 of his unpublished monograph, "The Appearance of Ignorance: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Vol. 2". This book is currently under review at Oxford University Press.

commonly used verbs in English (Davies and Gardner 2010), the most prominently used term in epistemic assessment (Gerken 2015), and is unlike almost every other word because it finds a precise meaning equivalent in every human language (Goddard 2010). These facts suggest that knowledge-talk plays an important and perhaps indispensable role in our communicative practices (see Hannon 2015). Why would such a common term in our language fail in such a radical way? If it did, that would be pretty interesting.

Do Contextualists Beg the Question?

In presenting their argument, contextualists merely *assume* that we meet ordinary standards for knowledge. But are they entitled to this assumption? Isn't this *begging the question* against the skeptic? As Brueckner writes,

Wait a minute. How do I know that any speaker is ever in an ordinary conversational context? Sure, in a normal, non-vat-world of the sort I take myself to inhabit, there are normal speakers who speak and write (and think) from within ordinary conversational contexts. But I don't know that there are any such contexts in my world, which may be a solipsistic vat-world. (2004: 402)

There is some merit to this worry. How could contextualists claim to be *defeating* the skeptic if one of the contextualist's key points merely presupposes the skeptic is wrong?

The contextualist is not arguing that skepticism can be resolved in a way that would fully satisfy the skeptic. If that were the contextualist's goal, he would certainly beg the question. Rather, the contextualist is trying to provide a resolution to the skeptical paradox in a way that makes the most sense of all the intuitions involved. The contextualist will say his view is more plausible because he can explain three key facts: why the skeptic and the non-skeptic *think* they are contradicting each other; why skepticism seems threatening; and why we ordinarily *do* meet the standards for knowledge. In contrast, the skeptic is left with the burden of explaining why we are systematically mistaken about whether we have knowledge. By accounting for the plausibility of all the claims constitutive of the puzzle, the contextualist claims this solution is superior to rival positions, including the skeptic's.

5. Conclusion

Contextualism was recently judged to be the most popular view in the semantics of knowledge ascriptions.²⁰ One of the main virtues of this view is that it can allegedly resolve the problem of skepticism. However, this view is not without criticism. I've indicated how contextualists have, or might, reply to some objections, but the issue is far from settled. I'll conclude with three questions for the contextualist.

First, if the contextualist is right that merely considering a skeptical possibility is not sufficient to place me in a context with elevated standards, then why does it seem impossible to reasonably claim to know, say, that I am not a brain in a vat? *Whenever I*

²⁰ According to a recent survey, 40.1% of philosophers endorse contextualism, whereas 31.1% are invariantists, 2.9% are relativists, and 25.9% classify as "other" (Bourget and Chalmers 2014).

think about this possibility, it strikes me that I do not know it does not obtain. Second, on what grounds can we be said to know, even according to ordinary standards, that we are not brains in vats? We can't say that our evidence against this possibility is good enough because we have *no evidence whatsoever* that could count against it. Third, contextualists have not explained *why* there would be such diverse standards for "knowledge."²¹ The contextualist merely points out that, given our linguistic behavior, we *do* seem to have them. But there are non-contextualist ways to explain our linguistic behavior (Stroud 1984; Rysiew 2001; Davis 2004; Stanley 2005; Brown 2006). For these and other reasons, the effectiveness of the contextualist solution to skepticism remains to be determined.²²

²¹ Although see Henderson (2009), Hannon (2013), and McKenna (2013) for an exception.

²² Thanks to Wesley Buckwalter, Elizabeth Edenberg, Stephen Grimm, Jonathan Ichikawa, Robin McKenna, and Mike Stuart for helpful comments and discussion.

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