# FROM CONTEXTUALISM TO SKEPTICISM

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It is generally assumed that epistemic contextualism blunts the force of "external world" skepticism. Herein, I argue that this is not the case. Contrarily, I maintain, contextualist considerations, when plausibly construed and reflectively applied, support rather than undermine the skeptic's agenda. Why? Because the contexts of assessment against which we can rightfully judge that knowledge is or is not available ultimately consist in little more than our own presuppositions concerning the objectivity of the items at issue. And what this implies, given the mind-independence of the external world, is the aptness of skeptical epistemic standards. In short, once we recognize the actual and limited role that contextualist considerations are allowed to play in knowledge attribution, we can see that "external world" skepticism has always emerged from manifestly contextualist assumptions about knowledge.

To determine the plausibility of this diagnosis we need to examine the mechanics through which investigatory context supposedly acts to segregate the negative consequences of skeptical reasoning from the positive claim-making procedures of naturalistic epistemic practice. We would do well to start here with David Lewis, who has struggled valiantly to articulate in painstaking detail (as was his manner, God bless his soul) the contextualist principles that delimit the scope and range of counterpossibility relevance. Even though Lewis' declared starting presumption here is the infallibility of knowledge, he denies that context-invariant ignorance follows from this assumption. Why? Because even though for Lewis one only knows that *p* if and only if *p* holds in every possibility left uneliminated by S's evidence, relevant ranges of counterpossibilities shift with investigative context. What we know thus varies with investigative context because what counts as infallibility varies with this context (222 ff.).

Consider just three of Lewis' contextualist prescriptions in this connection. The "rule of attention," dictates that counterpossibilites are relevant only as they happen to be those to which we attend (230). The "rule of belief' dictates that no counterpossibliity may be ignored if it is one that the cognizer correctly or incorrectly accepts (226). The "rule of conservatism" tell us that we may safely accept the presuppositions of our conversational community (230). Such rules are subject to mutual conflict, of course. But this is a complication that need not concern us here.

The role of such rules is to track conversational occurrences that are jointly sufficient to induce shifts in our epistemic standards. Philosophical reflection, on Lewis' account, creates an investigative context where, because there are no constraints on the counterpossibilites that we may invoke, there is no effective limit to which our epistemic standards converge. On this account, radical skeptical reasoning is indeed legitimate, but only within the specialized and segregated context of skeptical inquiry. It cannot be generalized to threaten any and all of our worldly knowledge claims.

The central question we need to ask about this and all similar accounts has been

noted before: Why should we take such contextualist principles to enjoy truly normative force? (Williams, "Contextualism" 14) To answer this question, we need to decide what we take such principles to really describe? Are they merely popular constraints upon conversational practice? And, if so, why should we take them to have ultimate authority over what we do and do not know or reasonably believe? Why should we take the mere citation of facts concerning the conditions under which various counterpossibilities are ordinarily regarded as even relevant to the task of answering a skeptic whose opening dialectical move is the claim that ordinary practice blithely ignores his own distinctions and insights?

Suppose we take rules of attention, belief, conservatism and the like to function in the above-described manner, as canonical regulations of ordinary conversational practice. What else must we assume if we are to non-arbitrarily endow them with anti-skeptical import? Presumably, we must somehow link them to the world in the right way, so as to insure their systematic co-variation with external states of affairs. How is this to be done?

For the internalist, it must be done through the intermediary of perceptible evidence. But the skeptic's central suspicion, of course, is that this cannot be accomplished. For the externalist, such a link is presumably beside the point. Why? Suppose, for a moment, that one is an externalist about knowledge, where this externalism is fleshed out in either causal or reliabilist terms. Leaving aside incidental epicycles and qualifications, externalists take one's knowing that *p* to consist in one's standing in appropriate causal or reliabilist relations to the fact that *p* itself. Now what could contextualist considerations add to such an account? That is, what form could we allow a consistently contextualist externalism to take? Certainly it could not invoke the likes of Lewis' principles of attention and belief and conservatism, since these are the very principles whose normative status we are trying to justify (in addition to which the first two, at least, are probably best construed in internalist terms). For the externalist, one will already either know or not know as a function of one's occurrent causal or reliabilist connections with one's environment, irrespective of one's evidential situation. An externalist contextualism would necessarily maintain something like the following: which causal or reliabilist relations are required to hold for knowledge to accrue is itself a function of the externalistic situational context in which these relations obtain. But, now, what could such externalistic contextual or situational factors consist in other than those very causal or reliabilist relations between knower and fact known that figure into the externalist's judgment, *qua* externalist, that knowledge accrues?

Michael Williams has argued for the more limited claim that no form of contextualism that understands the shifting of contexts solely in terms of changing conversational factors can be responsive to the skeptic's concerns. As he notes, whatever real work is done on Lewis's account is actually done by entirely different principles that Lewis articulates, i.e., the Rule of Actuality (dictating that actually obtaining possibilities can never be ignored) and the Rule of Resemblance (dictating that saliently similar possibilities must be similarly attended to or ignored) (Lewis 225, 227). But these rules, Williams notes, concern similarities "between our epistemic situation in the actual world and our epistemic situation in

worlds involving massive deception," not conversational factors (Williams, "Contextualism" 20). And these similarities are ones that the skeptic denies we can know to obtain. Thus, Williams' contention is that no form of contextualism relying upon mere shifts of interest, focus, or attention with changing conversational factors does justice to the skeptic's actual challenge.

As an alternative to such "simple conversational skepticism," Williams recommends an alternative contextualism that he feels is more effective. On this alternative account, the special character of skeptical inquiry is not captured by the mere admissibility of various far-fetched error possibilities, but by the skeptical epistemologist's determination to change the subject from the investigation of knowledge to something else of concern only to him. Thus, Williams writes, "the admissibility of skeptical hypotheses does not define the context of doing epistemology. It is doing epistemology that makes skeptical hypotheses seem relevant." (Williams, *Unnatural Doubts* 21) The seminal feature of "skeptical" error-possibilities, he tells us, is not that they are remote but that they are generic, in the sense that they are geared to threaten best-case knowledge claims such that if we do not know them, we do not know anything concerning the world around us. To entertain such counterpossibiites, on Williams' account, is not merely to raise "the level of scrutiny," but the "angle" of scrutiny (Williams 22). And in doing this, we change the subject. He asks us to imagine a physicist who, seeking to control more experimental variables, raises his level of scrutiny by repeating his experiments under more and more rigorously restricted circumstances. This, Williams notes, is fine. However, "if [the physicist] starts wondering whether he is a brain in a vat, this will not inaugurate an even more scrupulous approach to his research: rather, the introduction of the generic defeater submerges the given inquiry in a completely different kind of investigation" (22). The contextualism that Williams recommends is one on which our epistemic assessment varies with disciplinary circumstances much more readily than with "simple conversational context." This approach to contextualism, though more evocative than simple conversational variants, is unfortunately no more effective. For skeptical inquiries into knowledge and ordinary/scientific inquiries into knowledge to regard different subject matters would require, not a difference in procedural constraints upon our knowledge-proclamation practices, but a difference in relevant objects of knowledge. To claim that prosaic and skeptical epistemological enquirers are up to two entirely different things is to claim that they have nothing in common. But on the face of it they clearly do: they share a common concern to determine the conditions under which worldly proclamations of fact may be made, and subsequently allowed to enter into logical and inferential relations to other claims with which we are interested. So, broadly we can say that ordinary/scientific epistemology and skeptical epistemology are part of the same discipline, i.e., that discipline concerned to investigate our epistemic access to worldly reality. As long as the skeptical epistemologist and Williams' physicist are concerned to inquire into the accessibility of the same single, common mind-independent reality, it is hard to see how the difference between them could reflect anything more than a simple disagreement over the proper identification of appropriate epistemic requirements. And if the diagnosis of Part II is correct, then these differences concerning requirements can

themselves reflect nothing more than the distinctive generality of the skeptic's concerns. The objects that our knowledge claims regard remain the same throughout our external worldly setting, and it would seem to be this that ultimately determines whether the skeptic's questioning inaugurates more scrupulous research into the original subject matter or "a completely different kind of investigation" entirely. In short, it is hard to see in what sense the skeptic could be "changing the subject." Thus, where Williams argues that no simple conversational variant of contextualism can defuse the skeptic's challenge, I maintain that, while this is true, his own alternative disciplinary form of contextualism is of no help either.

The moral is this: conterxtualism in either its conversational and disciplinary form, has nothing to add to externalism. It is only as an internalist position that contextualism can even be motivated. This is because it is only as an internalist position that contextualism has anything to contribute to the reinstatement of knowledge. Contextualist considerations from the standpoint of externalism are necessarily redundant.

I argue above that contextualism can non-redundantly act only as a supplement to internalistic accounts of knowledge. Prior to this, I point to the seeming inability of the likes of Lewis' attention, belief, and conservatism principles to confront the concerns of the skeptic as a result of their inability to insure a systematic covariance between our beliefs about the world and external states of affairs. Now, this latter criticism, it must be emphasized, has wide application. It is generalizable to versions of contextualism other than Lewis', both those that do and those that do not invoke the notion of "relevant alternatives." Consider DeRose's theory as one which does invoke this notion, and Cohen's (later) theory as one which doesn't (DeRose, "Skeptical Problem" 1995; Cohen 1999) On DeRose's account, one's belief that $p$ is sensitive if it is not the case that one would believe $p$ if $p$ were false, and one's strength of epistemic position is a measure of the range of possible worlds through which one tracks a proposition's truth-value. With these locutions in place, DeRose asserts that the mere mentioning of skeptical hypotheses expands the number of relevant alternative worlds across which one's sensitivity must extend, rendering one's strength of epistemic position inadequate to the demands of knowledge. On Cohen's account, what one reckons knowledge to be varies with context. However, in all contexts the very same counterpossibilities remain relevant and require addressing. What varies with context is not the range of counterpossibilites that count as relevant, but rather the strength of evidence required to address them.

Despite their differences, however, both of these accounts are strong on description but weak on explanation. Since neither is accompanied by a substantive story about why their respective adjustments in context should cause relevant worlds or evidential demands to vary, neither is in a better position, *vis-à-vis* the skeptic, than Lewis'. As far as the skeptic is concerned, there is no significant difference between these two contextualist accounts. They are, in effect, mere tactical variants of a single strategy.

Similar remarks apply with regard to the distinction between subject-contextualists and attributer-contextualist strategies. Subject contextualists maintain that shifting epistemic standards are set by the contexts of knowers themselves, whereas attributer contextualists maintain that these standards are set by the contexts of third-person attributers of knowledge to others. DeRose, for one, has argued in favor of attributor contextualism (DeRose, "Contextualism" 190-91) But once again such arguments leave the central issue untouched: Why should we presume that conversational constraints on focus or attention track evidential indicators of counterpossibility relevance. The question of whose conversational constraints are at issue is simply not to the point.

Finally, parallel comments apply when we construe contextualism as a semantic thesis on which the consequence that context has on counterpossibility relevance or standards of knowledge is effected through the shifting meanings of epistemic terms. Such semantic renderings of contextualism do no more than non-semantic renderings to allay skeptical questions which quickly re-emerge in a slightly different form: Why should we care that the meanings of epistemic terms vary with changes in conversational factors if we have no reason to think that these changes in conversational factors reflect variations in our epistemic access to theoretical truth? Without such a reason, why should we suppose that the senses of "know" characterizing ordinary conversational contexts concern relations of epistemological interest? Why should we think that conversationally-determined senses of "knowledge" are senses of "knowledge" at all? It is not enough to note with DeRose that in studying knowledge it is important to determine what it means to say that someone knows something (DeRose, "Contextualism" 188-89). For, unless these varying senses of knowledge can be shown to fluctuate in accordance with accessible factors detailing the truth conditions of the propositions they regard, the skeptic can always maintain that ordinary senses of "know" are designed to meet pragmatic, rather than truly epistemological, needs, at least insofar as we take our epistemological concerns to be genuinely truth-related?

My argument is thus with the categorical character of DeRose's claim that the contextualism/invariantism debate, as an issue in the philosophy of language, "is of profound importance to epistemology" (DeRose 188-89). For, whether it is or is not of any epistemological interest at all is ultimately dependent upon prior metaphysical commitments concerning the mind independence and language independence of the world that our knowledge claims regard.

So far, we have reached two primary conclusions. For one thing, in speaking of epistemic accessibility, we have excluded all externalist criteria from consideration. The reason for this, once again, is that contextualist constraints add nothing of substance to externalist constraints. If one is an externalist, then one will regard one's knowledge status to have been already settled long before contextualist conditions are able to do any work. Second of all, for contextualism to militate against skepticism, it must be the case that whatever contextual factors we take to determine the nature or strength of our evidential criteria or the pertinent senses of our epistemic terms, these contextual factors must be ones which track the epistemic accessibility of the subject matter at hand. We have seen that conversational factors do not do this. Neither do Williams' disciplinary factors. So, what

sorts of factors would? Numerous possibilities, subject to both internalist and externalist construal, suggest themselves, and I have no concern here to canvass them all. But changing requirements on claimants' observational care constitute one prospect. And changing requirements on claimants' competence or background knowledge constitute another. In the case of the first, we are imagining that some investigative contexts might require greater observational thoroughness than others because they require relatively greater concentration on occurrent circumstances of observation and attention (e.g., observations of the very small or the very distant). In the case of the second, we are imagining that the subject matter the claim regards might require special technical competence on the part of claimants (e.g., the ability to recognize that this cloud chamber track indicates the passage of a charged particle). Might not such factors, in and of themselves, cause appropriate standards of knowledge to vary in precisely the way the contextualist describes?

Let us think about such factors more closely. To suppose that changing requirements on either claimants' observational care or recognitional competence motivate contextualist shifts in standards of knowledge is to suppose that these requirements alter in response to the changing epistemic accessibility of the subject matters at hand. Once again, this is required by internalist constraints which must be in place if contextualist considerations are to play any role in knowledge attribution at all. But, when do requirements on observational care or recognitional competence so track the epistemic accessibility of claimants' subject matters? The answer would seem to depend upon the metaphysical characters of the subject matters themselves.

Note that here the question is not simply one of whether or not the subject matter allows us epistemic access to it on the condition of adequate cooperation by perceptual faculties, recognitional and classification abilities, and circumstances of inspection? Why? Because all these factors regard subject matters of a comparable character to that which we seek to investigate. Alternatively, we might say that they become part of the subject matter of our investigation itself. In asking whether we know that there exist tables in this room is to ask about the knowability of a certain kind of object, i.e., a mind-independent exemplar of Austinian medium-sized dry goods. And it is because the factors concerning our perceptual faculties, recognitional and classification abilities, and circumstances of inspection involve items of the very same kind that we lack presumptive access to them. It is because of this lack of presumptive access that prosaic questions concerning our knowledge of tables tumble into questions concerning whether or not we know that the world is, even in very general character, as we ordinarily take it to be, yielding skeptical results in the process.

There is, I readily grant, nothing original in the suggestion that skepticism arises as a pertinent worry concerning "external objects" because external objects and the external circumstance in which they occur are taken to have a distinctively mind-independent character. To say this is merely to recapitulate the argumentative strategy of the very tradition (of Descartes and others) that contextualists dismiss as naive. The point I wish to make concerns the consequence of this fact for our understanding of contextualism itself. If, as I have argued, contextualist considerations add nothing to externalism, then the only proper contextualist considerations can be internalist ones. But, if internalist contextualist factors fail, as I have also argued, to insure systematic co-variation between

beliefs and the states of affairs they concern, then contextualism does nothing to address the skeptic's concerns.

What I have suggested is that all that the epistemologist, *qua* contextualist, has left to which he may refer are his own presuppositions concerning the metaphysical characters of the objects about which he hopes to know and the circumstances in which he hopes to know them. These are internalist factors, as they are revealed by something akin to conceptual analysis as one asks oneself about the level of mind-independence one takes an object, and its external circumstances of occurrence, to enjoy.

When the epistemologist poses such questions, the answers she gets vary from topic to topic, shifting radically as her concern swings from medium-sized dry goods to numbers to doctor's office reports of "where it hurts." But these are precisely the sorts of complications that the skeptical epistemologist has always taken into account in judging that our knowledge of first-person beliefs enjoys a different status than our knowledge of external objects in worldly environmental settings.

Here, I would suggest, we do have a somewhat surprising consequence. For, to the extent that skeptical epistemologists have always acknowledged the dependence that knowability has on subject matter, skeptical epistemologists has always paid close attention to the only contextualist considerations to which he may legitimately appeal. Reflective worldly skeptical reasoning has not typically consisted in a purely formal nay-saying reaction to positive epistemic claim-making executed in complete disregard of relevant contextualist considerations. It has, rather, been thoroughly informed by the only kinds of contextual factors which we can coherently understand as pertinent to skeptical issues regarding knowledge (i.e., the presumed metaphysical features of the alleged objects of inquiry and their external circumstances of occurrence) that bear on their level of epistemic accessibility. Because first-personal belief-contents are taken to be mind-dependent in a way that public physical objects and their environmental settings are not, the notional content of our beliefs about worldly reality is seen to radically underdetermine the nature of this reality itself, giving our first-personal beliefs greater assurance than our worldly beliefs. Perhaps the most concise way of articulating this point is by saying the following: *The contextualist mistakes differences in criteria of knowledge for differences in the meaning and import of knowledge or the word "know" across varying situations (conversational, circumstantial, and disciplinary). Criteria changes with subject matter, irrespective of how invariant the meaning or import of knowledge-talk may be.*

## Conclusions

My conclusions are admittedly atavistic. Contextualism fails to provide us with a method for circumventing skeptical consequences because contextualist considerations are themselves best seen as the essential source of these of these consequences. Contextualism generates skepticism. Let me conclude by both qualifying and extending this moral.

By way of qualification, we need to note that this is an essentially conditional thesis, and for two distinct reasons. First, it presupposes internalism. Once again, I have argued for

this in the course of arguing that contextualism is not a natural supplement to externalist epistemology. Second, it presupposes that the objects of natural science are as they are irrespective of how we perceive or conceptualize them (Stroud). To this extent, it presupposes common sense metaphysical realism. For these two reasons, I offer the thesis that contextualism generates skepticism as an essentially conditional claim, since I am concerned here neither to argue against externalism nor for metaphysical realism (even though my sympathies in these connections may be evident).

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