

Ascribing Knowledge in Context: Some Objections to the Contextualist's Solution to Skepticism

MICHAEL HANNON

THE history of skepticism is extensive and complex. The issue has changed shape numerous times, thus making it difficult to combat a general skeptical problem. Contemporarily, the dilemma is structured in the form of the skeptical hypothesis (SH), and it is this formulation that is the focus of this paper.

The core element of the skeptical hypothesis is the possibility of a delusion (D) that is irreconcilable with some ordinary empirical proposition (O) that one allegedly knows. The delusion may be that “I am dreaming” (Descartes), “I am a brain in a vat” (Putnam), or “zebras are actually cleverly painted mules” (Dretske). Equally, the empirical propositions that I claim ordinarily to know might include “I am standing,” “I have hands,” and “zebras are not actually cleverly painted mules.”

The skeptical hypothesis (SH) can be expressed in three parts:

- (1) It is not the case that I know that I am not deluded.

- (2) If I do not know that I am not deluded, then I do not know some ordinary empirical proposition.

Michael Hannon recently finished his undergraduate studies at York University where he majored in criminology and philosophy. He was admitted to the University of London (King's College) for philosophy but has decided to defer his acceptance for one year in order to study the history of Western philosophy. For his graduate studies, he plans on researching both moral education and moral intuition through the works of Wittgenstein.

(3) Therefore, it is not the case that I know some ordinary empirical proposition.

However, a significant fact is missing from this formulation, namely:

(4) I know some ordinary empirical proposition (e.g., that I have hands).

Individually, both SH and (4) seem plausible. On the one hand, however unlikely it may seem to suppose that I am deluded, it also seems true that I do not know that I am not deluded; indeed, how could I know such a thing? On the other hand, if I propose that I have hands, or if I propose any other ordinary empirical assertion, it seems persuasively true. Nevertheless when taken together, these claims result in a logical contradiction; that is, it is not the case that I know O—given (1) and (2)—and yet I know O. Something has to give.

There are three possible ways to reject SH. One can deny the first premise, maintaining instead that one does in fact know that one is not deluded. This position was famously—perhaps infamously—defended by G.E. Moore in his “Proof of an External World.” One can also deny the second premise by arguing that people can know both O and D simultaneously. Fred Dretske and Robert Nozick have taken this position by denying the validity of the epistemic principle of deductive closure. Finally, one can allow both (1) and (3) in contexts where SH has been raised, while nevertheless allowing for the denial of (3) in ordinary conversational contexts. Keith DeRose, Stewart Cohen, and Ludwig Wittgenstein are the principal defenders of this position.

Contextualism holds that skepticism is insoluble and that once SH has been raised, any attempt to refute the skeptic on her own ground is destined to fail. For this reason, the contextualist is willing to concede both the first and second premises to the skeptic since considering the premises implies that SH is necessarily in play. However, the contextualist also maintains that skepticism does not necessarily conflict with our ordinary claims of possessing knowledge. It is wrongly assumed that in order to refute the skeptic one must show that the skeptical possibility (D) does not obtain. The contextualist would argue that ascriptions of knowledge are context-sensitive, and that the truth-values of utterances involving the word “know” (and its cognates) depend on standards that are contextually

determined. Skeptical arguments only succeed because they exploit the conversational context in which words that have epistemic significance are uttered. However, in ordinary conversational contexts where there is no possibility of skeptical error, it is perfectly appropriate to ascribe knowledge to subjects who utter an O. Therefore, we can in ordinary contexts be said to know O.

In this paper, I intend to criticize the contextualist solution to the problem of skepticism. The contextualist would have us believe that skepticism does not necessarily conflict with our claims of ordinary knowledge possession and that knowledge is possible given what the skeptic says. This is because ascriptions of knowledge are ostensibly context sensitive, and their truth-values depend on contextually determined standards. However, although contextualism provides very persuasive arguments against skepticism, I will demonstrate that this position is vulnerable to a number of objections. I maintain that if contextualism is to be considered a viable theory, these objections must be resolved.

This paper is divided into three sections. In the first, I examine two notable alternatives to the skeptical hypothesis. Specifically, I outline both the Moorean denial of the first premise and the Dretskean denial of the second premise. I demonstrate that both positions are flawed and thus ineffective in disarming the skeptic. In the second part, I critically analyze the anti-skeptical position offered by the contextualists. This analysis consists of providing a general outline of contextualism, as well as its relevance to the problem of skepticism. In the third part, I levy some objections to the contextualist treatment of skepticism.

Moorean Denial of the First Premise

Moore has reacted to SH by arguing that, despite the initial plausibility of (1), he is significantly more certain of (4) (“Here is a hand,” says Moore, with a characteristic wave). However plausible the premises of SH may be, it is more reasonable to maintain that we do in fact know many things; thus, SH lacks the impetus to topple our knowledge of many ordinary empirical facts. When reflecting on Descartes’ dreaming hypothesis, Moore willingly concedes the second premise, stating, “I agree with the part of the argument which asserts that if I do not know that I am not dreaming, it follows that I do not know that I am not standing up.” Moore then proclaims,

however, that *he does know* that he is standing up (4), and concludes that the skeptical alternative *must* therefore be false given (2). Since the paradox arises from maintaining both SH and (4), Moore is content with rejecting SH in favor of (4) because it has persuasive, intuitive plausibility.

However, this solution is not very satisfying for several reasons. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein suggests that Moore's argument fails because his claim to know O invites the question of how he came to know O, thus dragging him back into the skeptical debate. By failing to account for how he came to know O, Moore also fails to demonstrate how D is false. Thus, Wittgenstein remarks that "Moore's view really comes down to this: the concept 'know' is analogous to the concept 'believe'" (5). Moore resorts to mere picking and choosing without a sufficient grounding for his decision. Simply to argue that it is adequate to rely on one's intuition of O rather than D fails to recognize that D itself has considerable intuitive pull. In seeking a solution to skepticism we should seek to explain how we fell into this trap in the first place. Since each premise seems intuitively plausible when taken individually, Moore indeed seems to resort to arbitrary preference. For these and other reasons, many philosophers have rejected the Moorean anti-skeptical response.

Dretskean Denial of the Second Premise

In "Epistemic Operators," Dretske denies the second premise of SH (131–44). As stated, (2) holds that if it is not the case that one knows that one is not deluded, then it follows that one does not know some ordinary empirical claim. For instance, if I do not know that zebras are not actually cleverly painted mules, then I do not know that those animals are zebras. This premise relies on the epistemic principle of deductive closure (DC). In logic, this principle can be formulated as follows:

(1) A knows that P

(2) A knows that P entails Q

(C) A knows that Q

As regards SH, DC holds that if I do not know that not-D, then it follows that I do not know O. The principle of deductive closure thus illustrates that knowledge is closed under logical implication.

Dretske feels obligated to concede the first premise to the skeptics. Unlike Moore, Dretske maintains that one does not know that one is not deluded. However, he does not admit that not knowing that not-D necessarily entails not knowing O. This is because he rejects DC, maintaining instead that DC is only semi-penetrating, and thus does not necessarily hold in every instance. Dretske believes that by giving up DC we can defeat the skeptic because SH hinges on deductive entailment.

The denial of the closure principle is an unpopular anti-skeptical position in contemporary debates. This position has been rejected by Stine, DeRose, Cohen, and many others, each of whom suggests that knowledge should remain closed under logical implication. The principal reason for sustaining DC is that by denying closure Dretske licenses an abominable conjunction—meaning it is possible to know both that one sees a zebra (O) while *simultaneously* maintaining that one does not know that the zebra is not actually a cleverly painted mule (D). Although this conclusion is clearly counterintuitive, it nonetheless follows if one rejects DC. Thus, most anti-skeptics advocate retaining DC or (2), refuting SH by some other method.

General Outline of Contextualism

Two weeks ago my sister went to the doctor for a routine checkup. Our family physician, Dr. Shan, was measuring my sister's height and remarked that she was "quite tall." Yesterday, my sister decided to become a model, so she contacted a local modeling agency to set up an appointment. When she arrived, the recruiter took one look at my sister and said, "Too short, next!"

Something funny is going on here. My sister did not shrink from the time of her doctor's appointment to the time of her appointment with the modeling recruiter (she remained five feet seven inches), nor was she wearing different shoes or using any other means of changing her height. Yet, she was nevertheless tall when at the doctor's office and short while at the modeling agency. How can this discrepancy be explained?

Contextualism maintains that the inconsistency in the above scenario is apparent and does not amount to a genuine contradiction. This example can be explained by examining the environment in which the words “tall” and “short” were uttered. By paying attention to the role of context, one can come to understand how the meaning of a word may change when used in different circumstances. In the case above, the standards of height are relative to the context in which the claim was uttered, and the truth-value of a proposition is shaped by a particular context. The standards in play with regard to height at the doctor’s office were different from the standards in play at the modeling agency, where the relative standards of height were more restrictive.

So how does contextualism relate to the skeptical hypothesis? As mentioned above, SH seems sound. However, SH directly contradicts that we do allegedly have ordinary knowledge of many things (4), such as having hands or knowing that zebras are not cleverly painted mules. In order to resolve this contradiction, the contextualist maintains that our knowledge of *O* can have different truth-values in different contexts, since different contexts call for different standards. For instance, in the case of my sister’s height, the doctor (*S*) claimed to know that my sister was tall (*O*), while the modeling agent (*S*) asserted that she was not tall (not-*O*). The propositions “*S* knows *O*” and “*S* does not know *O*” were thus shown to not logically contradict. Both propositions are correct because of the relative truth-value of knowledge ascriptions, which are shown to vary cross-contextually. In a similar vein, contextualism holds that I do not logically contradict myself when asserting, “I do not know that not-*D*,” and also assert, “I do know that *O*,” so long as the context in which these statements are uttered prescribes different standards of knowledge. Such standards are more restrictive in the case of the former, while more liberal standards are in effect in the latter. Thus, the context of attribution allows for both claims to be true when uttered in the appropriate context.

Let us briefly consider another example in order to clarify how standards of knowledge can change in different contexts. Imagine that I have a roommate named Smith. In all the years I have known Smith, he has owned the same two pairs of shoes: his running shoes and his dress shoes. One day I arrive home at 4:30 PM with a good friend of mine, Jones. Jones and I enter the house and proceed to the kitchen, where we converse for several minutes. After a bit of discussion, Jones asks, “Is Smith home?”

Keep in mind that neither Jones nor I have seen Smith since our recent arrival. Nevertheless, I peer down the hallway and see both pairs of Smith's shoes on the shoe rack, and thus conclude, "Yes, Smith is home."

In this case, there are relatively relaxed standards of knowledge in effect. However, consider a second example. Imagine that everything in the above scenario remains true. But once Jones and I finish our conversation we decide to go out for dinner. After dinner, Jones and I part company, and I soon return home. Upon my return, I find that Smith is being arrested under suspicion of murder. A long-time enemy of Smith's had been killed that day, and Smith is the prime suspect. Coincidentally, the coroner had concluded that Smith's enemy was murdered at 4:30 PM.

At Smith's trial, the prosecutor puts me on the stand and asks, "Did you *know* that Smith was home at the time of the murder?" I respond, "Yes. His only pairs of shoes were in the house at the time, so he had to be home." But the lawyer presses, "*Is it not it possible* that Smith had a third pair of shoes of which you were unaware?" I concede, "Well . . . I suppose *it is possible*." The prosecutor thus remarks, "Aha! So you *did not know* that Smith was home!"

My knowledge of Smith's being home proved insufficient in court. However, one should not be so quick to assume, as the lawyer does, that I did not know that Smith was home. Rather, a contextualist would maintain that the standards of knowledge have changed. The truth-values of propositions in a criminal court are more restrictive than those that apply in more ordinary conversational contexts. As the standards of knowledge rise, the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds—possible hypothetical worlds which center around the actual world—increases. In suggesting the consideration of an alternative hypothesis, e.g., that Smith bought new shoes, the prosecutor has enlarged the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds to include the closest world in which my claim that Smith was home is false. However, the standards of knowledge invoked by the lawyer are not in place in every context. I did in fact know that Smith was home, in the context of my conversation with Jones, because seeing Smith's shoes, coupled with the knowledge that Smith has owned only two pairs of shoes, satisfied the relatively relaxed epistemic standards in effect. But in mentioning a possible alternative, the lawyer has shifted the context to a point where the truth-value of my claim is now false. But this is not to suggest

that the standards in effect during the criminal court proceeding apply in all contexts. This is easily demonstrated by pointing to the more liberal standards in place during a civil court trial. In civil court, what counts as knowledge is decided on a balance of probabilities, while criminal courts employ the standard of “beyond reasonable doubt.” As regards SH, contextualism maintains that skeptical alternatives are not *always* epistemically relevant with respect to all S-knows-that-O claims. Only if SH is a live hypothesis (e.g., one is debating with a skeptic or engaging in philosophical reflection) does the claim “S knows O” become false given (1) and (2). The semantic standards of knowledge are manipulated when one makes the skeptical argument. Thus, once SH has been raised, more restrictive epistemic standards are in play, and it is indeed correct to concede that one does not know not-D and—given DC—therefore does not know O.

One might think that in granting the truth of SH, I concede too much to the skeptic. The skeptic maintains that the possibility of D infects all of our ordinary knowledge propositions, not merely knowledge taken at some unattainably restrictive standard. But I contend that if the skeptic were to become greedy, if she were to push the argument further by maintaining that our ordinary empirical claims have therefore *always* been wrong, then she goes too far. It is not the case that we did not know O, but rather that we now do not know O under the unusually restrictive standards introduced by the skeptic. The skeptic, as an invariantist, wrongly assumes that the truth-values of knowledge ascriptions are not context-sensitive. In making this assumption she equivocates. Below I have rewritten SH to expose the hidden meaning behind the shifts in context.

(1) I do not know that not-D (*given the unusually restrictive standards introduced by SH*).

(2) If I do not know that not-D, then I do not know O. (*Here, the skeptic equivocates by shifting the sense of “know,” treating it as though the word possesses the same meaning cross-contextually.*)

(3) Therefore, it is not the case that I know O (*which is true only if SH is in play. But this does not refute my knowing O in more ordinary conversational contexts*).

The point is this: by suggesting that context shapes the meaning of the word “know,” the skeptic is forced into a position where she cannot deny that I know O in ordinary conversational contexts. SH is compatible with claims of ordinary knowledge because they do not logically contradict. A contradiction presupposes that the meaning of the word is invariant, but contradictions¹ can nevertheless take place over different contexts. Just as my sister can be both tall and short depending on the context, one can both know O and not know O, relative to the context. Our failure to see the change in context has thus far prevented our capacity to sustain O-type knowledge.

Contextualism can thus overcome the difficulties experienced by both Moore and Dretske. Moore attempted to refute the skeptic by holding onto the intuitive plausibility of O; however, Moore failed on two counts. First, he did not account for how he came to know O. Second, he failed to appreciate the intuitive plausibility of SH, thus resorting to picking and choosing between premises. What makes contextualism stronger than Moore’s anti-skeptical position is that it not only demonstrates how we can know O, it also explains the plausibility of SH. In addition, contextualism maintains the Dretskean idea that one can know both O and not-D without denying closure and embracing the abominable conjunction. This is because O is true in ordinary contexts, and not-D is true in contexts where SH is in play.

There is a persistent concern that in conceding SH, the contextualist also grants that the standards employed by the skeptic are actually the *correct* standards to employ. In the case of Smith’s trial, for instance, it can be argued that I *never* knew that Smith was home, but that I simply thought I knew. Thus, we ought not to ascribe the label “knowledge” because we do not meet the standards established by the skeptic, which are the right standards. However, DeRose has provided a convincing response to this objection. He argues that it is a strike against a theory of a common term of natural language when the theory implicates the speakers of that language into a systematic falsehood.² For example, someone can easily claim that there are no tall women because tall women are necessarily over seven feet. By what criteria can we assert that such a position is false, and

¹ Here I am referring to alleged, as opposed to genuine, contradictions.

² I have taken this objection and adapted it from DeRose’s “Solving the Skeptical Problem.”

that one should instead adopt more traditional and less restrictive standards? After all, our language very well *could* have developed in such a way that the word “tall” denoted the concept of “over seven feet” rather than “five feet seven inches.” But the point is that *we do not* talk about tall women by this standard, and the persuasiveness of a theory about a term common in natural language is dependant on how well it accords with ordinary language. To argue that the skeptical standard of knowledge is in fact the correct standard would imply that we often talk about knowing many things (O) that we actually do not know, thus implicating all speakers into a systematic falsehood. We describe women over five feet seven inches as tall in the same way we consider people to have common knowledge. In virtue of these facts, it is the traditional view, and not the skeptical view, that is true of *our language*. The correctness of the traditional view largely consists in such facts, as they provide us with the best evidence for accepting the traditional—rather than the skeptical—hypothesis regarding the semantics of “know.”

Some Reservations About Contextualism

Having outlined the contextualist anti-skeptical argument, I will express some objections to this position. To my knowledge, these objections have not yet received adequate treatment. I maintain that if contextualism is to be considered an adequate response to skepticism, these objections must be resolved.

First, virtually every defender of contextualism has asserted that *we do know* that we are not deluded, according to the ordinary standards of knowledge. But I am not so convinced. In fact, I think the contextualist can *never* claim to know not-D, even in the context of less restrictive standards. It seems that the very consideration of whether or not one knows not-D implies that SH is in play. However, if the context is such that SH is in play, then SH necessarily prevents one from knowing not-D. The contextualist seems to be caught in a contradiction. On one hand, she maintains that when SH is an active hypothesis we cannot know not-D. On the other hand, she asserts that we can (ordinarily) know not-D. But the mere consideration of D or not-D seems to imply that SH *is in play*, thus removing us from the context of ordinary knowledge claims. The paradox is such that the very mentioning of D or not-D invokes SH, which further entails

that we do not know not-D. Yet, if we do not know that not-D, and if the principle of deductive closure holds, then we do not know O. Even when in an ordinary context where I know O (thus implying that I know not-D), the mere mentioning or considering my knowledge of not-D implies that SH is relevant, thus dissolving my knowledge of O. As a result, we seem to be condemned to a position where we can ordinarily know O, which thus implies that we know not-D, but we can never *know* not-D.

Second, contextualism hinges on the notion that context determines how strong an epistemic certainty one must have for it to count as knowledge. But in all this talk of context, the contextualists have avoided proposing any general theory of how exactly context determines the standard. Furthermore, there is no mention of precisely how one can recognize shifts in context. Can we recognize a context shift immediately? Are contexts only recognizable once we are in them and not from an external standpoint? In the case of a civil or criminal trial, the standards of knowledge are explicitly outlined. However, this is clearly not the case in the context of ordinary dialogue between people, where interaction can be rather ambiguous. Therefore, I think that if contextualism is to be taken seriously as a solution to skepticism, its defenders must account for how the standards are shaped by context and how it is possible to recognize a context. Although this criticism may not be fatal to contextualism, I maintain that it needs addressing.

Third, the contextualists conveniently suppress any discussion of what *actually is the case* in their talk of context. Imagine that Henry is driving in the country and is passing a series of barns.³ In an ordinary context, one would rightly assume that the barns in Henry's visual range are real, rather than papier-mâché facades. But what if it actually were the case that some of the barns were fake? Henry would continue driving, unbeknownst to him that some of the barns he has just passed were papier-mâché. But would we say that he "knew" the barns were real? It seems clear that the standards of knowledge were the same, since no skeptical hypotheses were in play; it just so happened to be the case that a few of the barns were fake. How would the contextualist respond? It seems to me that the contextualist would maintain that Henry *knew* all of the barns were real. After all, no skeptical hypotheses were invoked, since Henry did not contemplate the

³ This example is used by Alan Goldman in "What is Justified Belief?"

possible existence of fake barns. Thus, contextualism seems to entail a peculiar position where Henry knows that the barns are real even though *they are not real*, and verifiably so. Consider my previous example regarding Smith's trial. The contextualist would argue that I "knew" Smith was home, given the relatively relaxed standards in place during my conversation with Jones. But imagine that it was later discovered (say, at his trial) that Smith had recently bought a third pair of shoes and that he was actually out killing his enemy at 4:30 PM. If this were true, then could I really be said to know that he was home, even though he demonstrably was not? This conclusion is clearly contrary to our ordinary intuitions, and as DeRose admits, a theory that fails to accord with ordinary language is likely false.

Last and most significantly, DeRose openly admits that he (and other contextualists) assume things that they *believe* but that the skeptic claims they *cannot know*. For instance, the claim that O-type beliefs are sensitive betrays the possibility that he is deluded. Indeed, if he is deluded, then he does not know that he has hands according to any standards. He can thus be accused of begging the question against the skeptic. Cohen expresses a similar worry, where he asserts that his argument begs the question against skepticism and that he does "not think either side of this dispute can demonstrate the correctness of its view to the other side." He argues that because we are antecedently convinced of the falsity of skepticism, the semantic version of contextualism can explain away our own "inclinations" towards skepticism. But the skeptic and the anti-skeptic seem to be stuck on different hilltops, and are thus incapable of reconciling their opposing views. Both DeRose and Cohen can only admit that they adamantly *believe* that they are not deluded, thereby leaving us in a position no better than Moore. Contextualism only seems to succeed because it accords with our ordinary intuitions, which provides the elbowroom required to satisfy those already unconvinced by skepticism.

I think that to fully refute the skeptic one must do it on one's own grounds in the context of restrictive standards. Indeed, when dealing with highly restrictive standards, we cannot maintain that we know anything. It is for this reason that contextualism has not been concerned with refuting the skeptical hypothesis, but rather with pushing it aside and showing it as irrelevant regarding our ordinary empirical propositions. The contextualist maintains that unless we want the word to mean something that is

impossible to achieve, we must incorporate context into our definition of knowledge. I have demonstrated that there are several problems with this theory that must be resolved. Until the contextualists manage to solve these criticisms or show them irrelevant, epistemologists have not been given adequate reason to adopt the contextualist solution.

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