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THOMAS Nagel, in his book The Possibility of Altruism, argues that desires are not the basis for all motivation.\textsuperscript{1} Nagel distinguishes between motivated and unmotivated desires and argues that some reasons can be traced to unmotivated desires (emotions, urges, etc.), but he argues that it has yet to be shown that all reasons for action must be traced back in this way. Nagel concludes that motivated desires, motivated by practical judgments, are a possible cause of motivation. Peter Ross, in his article “Explaining Motivated Desires,” compares two approaches to the motivational question: what he calls Nagel’s “rationalist” view and the “Humean” view.\textsuperscript{2} At the end of his article, Ross argues that the rationalist and Humean views turn out to be so similar that the problem must be resolved by claims about moral judgment. In this paper, I will argue that Ross seriously misconstrues the rationalist view, in particular Nagel’s view, and thus his misrepresentation undermines his conclusion that the rationalist and Humean views are so similar. To do this I will summarize both Nagel’s and Ross’s arguments, review their terminology, and then show that Ross’s argument (that the “directedness” of beliefs and of “states” needs goals) shows a misunderstanding of Nagel’s argument.

I will begin with how Ross presents the dispute. Ross defines two camps: the rationalists and the Humeans. Both of these camps are internalists; they believe that we are always motivated when we act, or that we

\textsuperscript{1} This book will hereafter be cited by the author’s last name followed by the page number.

\textsuperscript{2} This article will henceforth be cited by the author’s last name followed by the page number.

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act because we are motivated internally. The alternative view is externalist, which says we can act from external constraints. The dispute between the rationalist and Humean camps is about how to explain motivation for action. Ross explains that the Humeans believe desires to be the cause of motivation and that the rationalists believe motivation can be explained in terms of reason and belief. Ross uses Nagel’s rationalist argument from *The Possibility of Altruism* where Nagel makes a key distinction between motivated and unmotivated desires. Ross describes unmotivated reasons (by quoting Nagel): “[Unmotivated reasons] . . . ‘simply come to us’ independently of having (conscious or unconscious) reasons for them” (Ross 199). Nagel describes unmotivated desires as being like “appetites and . . . emotions” and as states that although they can “assail” us, they can be explained (Nagel 29). Unmotivated desires are thus desires such as hunger or urges such as seeing a candy bar you like and immediately wanting one. Unmotivated desires are contrasted by motivated desires, which Ross describes as desires had for reasons (Ross 199). An example of a motivated reason may be deciding after deliberation that it would be better to stay up and work on a paper than to go to sleep early. (I will discuss the nature of motivated desires below.) Beliefs and reasons do not explain unmotivated reasons at all; thus, unmotivated reasons are not of interest to us and will not be analyzed henceforth.

Ross presents Michael Smith’s argument in favor of the Humean view that all motivation stems from desire. Ross defines two types of reasons, motivating and normative, and two types of explanations, teleological and justificatory. Motivating reasons are “constituted by goal-directed intentional states” (Ross 200). Ross never explicitly explains what exactly Smith means by a ‘state,’ but I will assume he means a mental or psychological state, as in a disposition of some sort. The goal of these goal-directed intentional states is served by these intentional states—in other words there is a goal, and the point of these intentional states is to reach that goal. Thus, motivating reasons motivate because we have some intentional states or dispositions, etc., that aim at some goal, and acting would satisfy them. Teleological explanations explain motivating reasons. A teleological explanation explains a motivating reason in terms of goal-directed intentional states. What Smith seems to be saying is that we have many intentional states, and some of these states point to the same goal; that is why we have that goal. A normative explanation is a "propositional content on the basis of which
the contents of these [mental] states can be justified from the standpoint of some system of normative rules” (Ross 200). Justificatory explanations explain normative reasons in terms of some system of normative rules. I assume this refers to something such as not jaywalking because it is against the law (the law being the system of normative rules) or not lying because it violates Kant’s categorical imperative.

One last definition brings in the conclusion of Smith’s argument, that of “direction of fit.” There are two kinds of fit, also called directions of fit: mind-to-world and world-to-mind. The mind-to-world fit is when our minds fit the way the world actually is. World-to-mind fit is when we want the world to fit how our mind is. Another way to see it is that the mind-to-world fit represents the world as it is, and the world-to-mind fit represents the world as it is to be (Smith, The Moral Problem 7). Smith argues for the Humean view using motivating reasons in the following manner:

I have a motivating reason.

Teleological explanations explain motivating reasons.

Teleological explanations explain motivating reasons in terms of goal-directed states.

Goal directed states are a world-to-mind fit.

Desires are world-to-mind fit states.

Beliefs are mind-to-world fit states.

(C) Therefore, motivating reasons, and thus motivated desires, are explained in terms of desires, not beliefs.

Smith sums it this way, “The motive that motivates the desire must therefore embody some goal of the agent. But no belief could do that, for beliefs are not the right kind of state to embody the having of goals” (Smith, “Reason and Desire” 251–252).3

3 This book will hereafter be cited by the title followed by the page number.

4 This article from here on will be cited by the title followed by the page number.
I will start with motivating reasons and goal-directed intentional states. Motivating reasons are defined in terms of goal-directed intentional states, and this definition or explanation of motivating reasons is teleological. If we have a motivating reason, we have it because we have goal-directed intentional states, but what exactly is a goal-directed intentional state? Ross, via Smith, defines a goal-directed intentional state as a state that has a world-to-mind fit; in other words, he defines it as a desire. But what is a desire? And how do we find or gain a new one? Ross seems content to say that a motivating reason is explained by a desire, and that is why motivation is always caused by a desire. But a goal-directed state is not a sufficient explanation of what a desire is. A state can be some state of being or disposition, so does this include things like appetites or emotions? I will assume this is what is intended and appeal to Nagel’s soda pop and dime example (Nagel 33–34). The example is that of getting thirsty and putting a dime in a soda pop machine in order to get a drink. It is clear that in this example an unmotivated desire is present: thirst, which, although it can be explained, simply assails me. However, I may be able to reason myself into being thirsty; for example, I prepare to do some athletic activity and need to keep myself hydrated. But let us say in our (Nagel’s) example that I am thirsty simply because my body has run out of water and is telling me to seek some water. At this point it can be said of me that I have a goal-directed intentional state. My state is thirst, and my goal is to drink something refreshing.

So far, Smith’s definitions can explain the situation, but here the problems start. This is because simply having this unmotivated desire is not sufficient to be motivated to put a dime in a slot: it “seem[s] mysterious that thirst should be capable of motivating someone not just to drink, but to put a dime in a slot” (Nagel 33). I have the desire to quench my thirst, but not to put a coin into a slot—the urge to put a coin into a slot has never occurred to me. Something more is needed, and that is reason or deliberation. I reason (from prior experience, observing others, etc.) that in order to obtain a can of pop, I will need to insert a coin into the slot. After reasoning that putting a coin in the slot a can of pop will come out, I am motivated to do it, and only then do I have a desire to put a coin in the slot. This is a clear case of having an unmotivated desire (thirst) and in order to fulfill that unmotivated desire, I reason to some further action. I derive motivation to do that further action not from my unmotivated
desire, but from reason. After deriving a motive to do this further action, I desire to act.

Let us see how this example fits into Ross and Smith’s terms. We can distinguish two motivations (although there may be more) that need explaining. They are to quench my thirst and to insert a coin into the slot. In the first case the motivating reason is thirst. The teleological explanation, in terms of a goal-directed intentional state, is that my body seeks to stay hydrated. The fit of this state is world-to-mind because the mind is looking for the world to satisfy its needs. The motivation to quench my thirst has thus simply assailed me and fits Nagel’s description of unmotivated desires. Thus, the first motivating reason is caused by a desire, as Smith contends.

The second motivation is to insert a dime into the slot. The motivating reason is to obtain a can of pop (to quench my thirst). The teleological explanation of this motivating reason, in terms of goal-directed intentional states, is that I have reasoned that inserting a dime in the slot will produce a soda pop with which I may quench my thirst. By that reasoning I have a desire to put the coin in the slot. But this is not a unique goal-directed intentional state—this desire to put the coin in the slot is not an additional desire, and this is the difference between Ross and Smith’s view and Nagel’s view. I derive the desire to put the coin in the slot by the nature of reason; as Nagel describes: “[The desire to insert the coin in the slot] is a desire motivated by thirst plus certain information” (Nagel 34). There need not be mention of any other desire, or directional state, in order to explain my motivation to insert the coin into the slot. There is no need because of the nature of reason, because by having a desire we automatically desire the means to the end: “Reasons are transmitted across the relation between ends and means, and that is also the commonest and simplest way that motivational influence is transmitted. No further desires are needed to explain this phenomenon” (Nagel 33). On this account there is no need for an additional desire.

As cited above, Smith says, “The motive that motivates the desire must therefore embody some goal of the agent. But no belief could do that, for beliefs are not the right kind of state to embody the having of goals” (The Moral Problem 251–252). Above I have effectively shown that beliefs may embody goals. Let us say I am motivated to act on some means. I am motivated to act because I have reasoned that through these means I may
achieve a desired end. In this case my desired end is to satisfy an unmotivated desire. My reasoning is therefore based on the belief that the means will bring about the end. Thus, my motivation, which comes from a reason based on beliefs, may embody my goal because “reasons are transmitted across the relation between ends and means” (Nagel 33). Because I have a reason to believe that a certain act will satisfy a desire of mine, I am automatically motivated to do that act and no further desire is necessary. Smith seems to be saying in this quotation, “One cannot have a desire without having a desire.” When Smith says, “The motive that motivates,” he must mean the reason that motivates the desire.

Why is it not the case that I can be motivated from practical judgment? Why do all desires have to be motivated by further desires? Smith says that if I have a goal (a desire, whether motivated or not) then that goal must be explained by some state that is goal-directed. But by ‘goal-directed state,’ Smith means another desire. Where do the desires end? If all desires have to be explained in terms of other desires, then all motivation would come from unmotivated desires, and the only reasons we would ever do anything would be because we have some type of urge or appetite to act. It is absurd to say that my motivation to get out of bed this morning was because of some urge or appetite (or some other unmotivated desire), especially because all the messages my body sent me this morning indicated that I should stay in the warm, restful environment; nevertheless, I got up. I have described a situation, my thirst and the soda pop, in which I derive motivation not from a desire, but through reasoning. I reasoned that I could obtain a soda pop by inserting a dime into the slot. Through this realization I was motivated to do so; there is no need for talk of a desire.

In the introduction of his article, Ross states that Nagel tries to prove that we can “explain motivation for action in terms of reason and belief alone” (Ross 199). I agree with this statement, although it may be a little deceptive. It may be better to say that Nagel sets out to prove that it is possible to explain motivation for action in terms of reason and belief alone; however, Nagel never explicitly states this. At the beginning of his chapter entitled “Desires,” in which he makes his important distinction between unmotivated and motivated desires, Nagel states his goal for the chapter is to “argue that . . . accounting for all motivations in terms of the agent’s desires will not work, and that the truth is considerably less obvious and more significant” (Nagel 27). Nagel goes on to explain that “other motivating
factors besides desire may be present among the conditions for the existence of those reasons [for motivation]” (Nagel 32). Nagel gives an argument that has been hinted at in this paper by my argument that if all motivation must stem from further desires, then we are all acting from unmotivated desires. If a practical judgment is not motivational, and practical reasoning is possible, then some further argument with a motivational conclusion is needed; however, one can always ask, “Why should I do that?” of all arguments. Thus, either practical judgments are motivational, or practical reasoning is not possible. Practical reasoning is possible; therefore, practical judgments are motivational.

Nagel shows that explaining motivation through desires alone does not work and that it is possible to be motivated by practical judgments. Ross, via Smith, attempts to give an argument that motivation must be explained in terms of desires, using terms that imply that motivation only comes from desire. We have seen that this is not the case, because motivation may be explained in terms of belief and reasoning. However, why cannot I be motivated by other things as well? My point is that Ross and Smith try to show that we can only be motivated by a narrow explanation of desires, but if we think about our everyday experience, it seems that our motivations can come from many different sources, including practical judgment, belief, and reasoning. Why cannot a person help another because they think it the right thing to do, and that is the end of the explanation? Or what would stop me from saying, “My shoe is untied, so I want to eat a candy bar”? Even though the idea may seem strange, and the two things totally unrelated, it seems that different people may have many different reasons and motivations for action. Restricting motivation to explanations in terms of unmotivated desires, urges, hungers, etc., seems strangely restrictive and not indicative of everyday experience. We are filled with more than just goal-directed intentional states, and these other things may also motivate us.
Works Cited

Moral value is supposed to be won and lost on a level playing field: good people are good on their own merit and bad people are bad because of their own failings. This is precisely the notion that comes under attack when Thomas Nagel points out that moral judgments depend not only on merit but on luck as well.\(^1\) The locus of this problem is the “condition of control,” the idea that one can only be responsible for what is under one’s control. The first part of this paper reviews two definitions of control—Rosen’s “proximal control” and an application of Wright’s “NESS condition”—that seem promising as solutions to the problem of moral luck. I will argue in favor of the latter. The second part discusses the extent to which either can truly solve the problem of moral luck and argues that any similar definition of control leaves a new problem of moral luck: luck in the degree of control one has.

The universal end of mankind is the highest moral perfection. . . . We must each of us, therefore, endeavor to guide our conduct to this end; each of us must make such a contribution of his own that if all contributed similarly the result would be perfection. (Kant, Lectures on Ethics 252)

This passage from Kant’s transcribed lectures neatly carves out two facets of an idea of morality that, for better or worse, has been extremely influential from time to time in philosophical discourse: first, that moral worth is purely within the control of each individual person, and second,\(^1\) See also: Williams, Bernard. Moral Luck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

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that moral worth is a supreme value. As Judith Andre notes, this forms a sort of ultimate justice in the world: each person is equally able to attain what matters most in life (“Nagel, Williams, and Moral Luck” 202).

In his essay “Moral Luck,” Thomas Nagel singles out the first facet as a troublesome piece of moral common sense. At the bottom of the first facet, that moral worth is a matter of personal merit, is “the condition of control”: one can only be held morally responsible for that which is under one’s control (Nagel 450). But if we examine our everyday moral judgments, we discover that we pass moral judgment on others for that which is, in whole or in part, beyond their control. There is a morally significant difference between murder and attempted murder, but this difference only arises out of sheer luck in outcomes—the fact that an assassin happened to miss his target, for example. Similarly, the drunk driver who kills a pedestrian has done a worse thing in moral terms than the drunk driver who makes it home safely, but this moral difference rests on the bad luck of encountering a pedestrian, not something that is under either driver’s control. Nagel goes on to name four kinds of morally relevant luck: first, constitutive luck, which is luck in the formation of one’s character and temperament; second, luck in circumstances that determine the moral tests one faces; third, luck in antecedent circumstances that determine what one does at the present (a result of determinism); and finally, luck in outcomes, as with attempted murder (Nagel 451). Nagel argues that if we enumerate all the ways in which we cannot be said to have control, including how our actions are presumably subject to various causal laws, then the area of what we control and are morally responsible for shrinks to an “extensionless point” (Nagel 454). We must then admit either that we are morally responsible for things outside of our control or that there is no justification for holding anyone morally accountable for anything. This is the problem of “moral luck.”

Gideon Rosen attempts to reconcile the seemingly plausible condition of control and everyday moral judgments by offering a definition of control that is supposed to eliminate the problem of moral luck. However, this definition does not hold up to everyday judgments. Moreover, any definition of the same form would leave us with a new problem of moral luck—luck in the amount of control we can be said to have.

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2 This article will hereafter be cited by the author’s last name followed by the page number.
3 This lecture will be cited by the lecturer’s last name.
Rosen begins with two concepts of control: “proximate control” and “ultimate control”. Agent X has proximate control over R if and only if there is a systematic causal correlation between X’s internal states and the outcome in R that is realized, while X has ultimate control over R if and only if X has proximate control and nothing other than X has proximate control over X’s inner states. Rosen’s own conceptual model for proximate control is an automatic light timer; the internal states of the timer are systematically correlated to whether or not the lamp is on. He adds that proximate control concerns a sort of correlation about which one can make counterfactuals (if the “on” state in the timer had not obtained, the light would not have turned on), but the correlation need not be perfect: it can occasionally be the case that some mechanism is sticky in the timer, and when it reaches the “on” state the light does not turn on. On the whole, though, it is considered reliable (Rosen). In this sense, the timer has proximate control over the states of the lamp, but it does not have ultimate control, because someone must set the timer.

From here it becomes clear that Nagel is thinking generally in terms of ultimate control and not proximate control: the notions of constitutive luck and luck in antecedent circumstances both depend on internal states of X being determined by something other than X. This is an argument against X having ultimate control in these cases, but these two kinds of luck are not in conflict with proximate control. Rosen then argues that both luck in circumstances and in outcomes involve the agent doing different things in different situations, and that difference is due to luck—but one can only be held responsible for what one has done, so the difference is not relevant (Rosen). One assassin kills his man and is guilty of murder while another assassin’s gun jams (due to luck in the outcome) and is only guilty of attempted murder. These assassins have clearly done different acts, so they are only being held responsible for what they have done. It is the same answer to the situation of two brothers in 1932: brother A stays in Germany and becomes a Nazi while brother B is sent by his parents to Argentina where he lives a quiet life. The latter may have gotten lucky with circumstances, but after all, he was not the one who became the Nazi. So, if A is presented with a moral test—whether or not to do something a Nazi might be asked to do, such as shoot a prisoner—and, looking at our definition of
proximate control, 'states of X' is taken here to mean decisions of A\(^4\) and ‘outcomes in R’ as the life vs. death outcomes of the prisoner, then A has proximate control and satisfies at least this condition\(^5\) for moral responsibility, since what A decides matters greatly for the prisoner. However, B, who is in Argentina at the time, does not have proximate control since there is presumably no decision he could make that would correlate with this prisoner’s outcomes. Thus, he cannot be held morally responsible. This is in line with “common sense” moral judgments.

However, common sense judgments about control cannot be simply a matter of cognitively apprehending the degree of correlation between decisions and outcomes. There is a significant difference between the notions of “control” and “having a chance to affect the outcome.” To return to the timer, would it be correct to say that the timer had control over the light if a certain state of the timer corresponded to the correct state of the light only 5% of the time? Certainly not; so what degree of correlation is needed?

Fortunately, it is not necessary to answer this question. Take the example of an assassin perching atop a building and aiming at his or her target in the park below. Assume that his or her aim is always perfect and that the gun always works such that the only way the target would not die when the gun is fired is if a bird happens to fly in the way of the bullet. Let us also stipulate that shooting the targeted person is the only possible means to kill that person in this situation. When we ask whether or not the would-be assassin has control over the two outcomes—(1) the target lives and (2) the target dies—we do not speak of the probability that a bird will get in the way; we simply ask if the bird did in fact get in the way or not. There are two possibilities concerning the bird, its presence at the right place and time or its absence, and each possibility implies something different about control if either one is realized. If the bird is not in the way, the assassin has control. If it is, the assassin cannot have control since its presence removes the only possible way of affecting the target’s outcomes. Still, one might say it is entirely possible that the target dies even if a bird gets in the way, and the bullet never hits the target. If that is the case, then there

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\(^4\) In the context of people as moral agents, "internal states” will always denote “conscious decisions” unless otherwise noted.

\(^5\) This cannot be the only condition for moral responsibility, as Rosen notes. There must, for example, be an epistemic condition as well: one must recognize the character of one’s action.
is no way the would-be assassin was responsible; we would start to look for other causes, perhaps a heart attack or a second assassin.

Rosen’s account of proximal control is not adequate, because defining control by degrees of causal correlation unnecessarily interjects an overgeneralized epistemic concern. Control is established in a particular situation, not across a range of situations. To say that the timer has proximate control is to say that the timer has had control in the past, such that it is reasonable to infer that the timer will have control in the future. But this is merely to make a judgment in uncertainty: one cannot know for sure that the timer will work in the next situation, but given that it usually works, it is reasonable to say that it should work in the next situation. This is only a judgment that the timer will probably have control since when the next situation arises, the timer either will or will not have control. Thus, control concerns a causal relation, not a causal correlation. To return to our assassin: assuming that the timely appearance of the bird is a random event, we cannot know for certain whether or not it will appear. The notion of proximal control suggests that we can still make a judgment about whether or not the assassin has control, but a much more commonsense judgment is to say that he or she probably has control given that it is not very likely that a bird gets in the way of the bullet—and if it is the case that a bird does get in the way, then the assassin cannot have control since it is not possible for him or her to affect the outcome of the target.

I have been leading to a notion of control that differs from proximal control, but until now I have not said anything positive about it, so let us take another example, a modified biblical example. Darius, King of Persia, hates Daniel and wants to see him die. So he contrives a plan whereby he will throw Daniel into the lions’ den on a specific date and time. When the time arrives, Darius learns that the lions have just been fed, making it unlikely that they would want to consume Daniel—let us say there is only a two percent chance that Daniel is eaten. Darius, a perennial optimist, nevertheless throws Daniel to the lions in the hope that they are still sufficiently hungry. It is perfectly obvious that if Daniel is indeed eaten by the lions, Darius is responsible, and he is therefore morally blameworthy. Still, if this outcome seems to depend on the hunger of a pack of lions, it does not seem like Darius has much control over it since he does not determine the lions’ hunger, so how are we to satisfy the condition of control?
In this situation, two conditions are required for Daniel to be eaten: (1) Darius must throw Daniel into the den and, (2) at least one lion must be suitably hungry. Together they make a sufficient set in that such a set would ensure that Daniel is eaten. The idea behind this observation, which dates back to J. S. Mill, is that what we commonly point to as causes of an event are usually not sufficient in themselves for the event (Wright, “Causation in Tort Law” 1790). The match may have caused the fire, but many other conditions were also necessary for the fire. In the example of Daniel and the lions, both of the elements of the set are necessary in that we can make a counterfactual: if either of the elements were not present, Daniel would not be eaten. But some elements may not be necessary: two of the lions may be sufficiently hungry. It only takes one hungry lion to kill Daniel, so the second is nonessential. It is relevant that an essential element was throwing Daniel into the den since it establishes the causal relation between Darius’s decision to throw Daniel into the den and Daniel’s death. It is precisely to say that if Darius had not so decided, Daniel would not have been killed. This is a straightforward application of Richard Wright’s idea of a NESS condition—a necessary element of a sufficient set (Wright 1790). Since control concerns a causal relation, and since this is a sufficient account of what it means to stand in a causal relation, then for X to have control over an outcome in R, it must be the case that an internal state of X is a NESS condition for that outcome in R. To keep the discussion clear, I will refer to this notion of control as ‘NESS control.’

There are some odd conditions that may be met and that may throw a wrench into the cogs of this theorem. Suppose there are two assassins working independently who happen to shoot the same target at the same time. The commonsense moral judgment is to say that they are both responsible for the assassination, but a difficulty lies in the fact that if one of them had decided not to shoot, the other still would have shot and killed the target; each assassin is by himself nonessential. Therefore neither has NESS control, and thus both seem to lack a condition of moral

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6 In this example, Daniel can be in the den if and only if Darius has thrown him there.
7 This article will hereafter be cited by the author’s last name followed by the page number.
8 Of course, there is an extensive literature devoted to examining conditional statements, but this is not my focus. I presume to say that if some element is essential for an outcome, then if that element were not there, that outcome would not obtain.
responsibility. Wright’s solution to such cases is to insist on the possibility of multiple sufficient sets for a given event (Wright 1790): the assassin on the left plus all else that allows his or her bullet to reach the target is one sufficient set, and the assassin on the right plus all else that allows his or her bullet to reach the target forms another. However, Wright’s account is slightly simplified. The left assassin is an essential element of a set sufficient for E only in the event that there is only one assassin present because it is still the case that if the left assassin had not fired, the right assassin would have, and the target would have died. The left assassin is an essential element in a set sufficient for E if and only if one acknowledges that all the other relevant conditions are bracketed out, treated as if not present, namely, the other shooter. Hence, this “other” sufficient set is merely a sufficient subset of the conditions that actually obtain because one must acknowledge the presence of the other assassin. So, an extended conception of a NESS condition would be “a necessary element of a sufficient set or subset.”

This definition may be a bit ungainly, but its awkwardness seems to come from overdetermination, when a sufficient set also happens to be more than just sufficient—such as when, in a set that requires n or more discrete elements to be sufficient, there are n + 1 or greater elements. Consider the case where an event E requires five people to be simultaneously placed on a scale: any fewer than five and E will not occur, while if there are more than five, E will still occur. Each of several people can decide, independently of all others, whether or not to be put on the scale. At five people on the scale, there is a sufficient set for E, and each element (person) in the set is essential. But what happens at six or more people on the scale? There is still, of course, a sufficient set, but now none of the elements are essential since removing any of them still leaves us with a set of five. If the presence or absence of any one person makes no difference for the outcome, it does not seem that any person can be said to have “control” in any sense. This may be an argument against the condition of control, as it appears we have an instance where the agents are all morally responsible (if E is morally relevant) and yet uniformly lack control.

But to say this is to rely too much on the first, unextended definition of a NESS condition. If none of these people have control, who or what does? There is nothing left that can answer, and it does not seem permissible to shrug off E’s occurrence as an act of God. Here it is a good idea to
take that there is no relevant property that any person or group of people may have that singles out from among the six people which five were essential for E because they all appear on the scale simultaneously. If there were such a means—say each person is now added to the scale sequentially—then there is no problem of control as all persons after the fifth can be singled out as “after the fact” (they are not elements of the sufficient set that actually obtains, which would consist of only the first five people), but here, any possible combination of five elements bears the same relation to E. Because no distinctions can be made among the elements as to which are essential and which are not (when it is the case that at least some are essential), then a way to acknowledge the equivalence of all elements with respect to E is to note that each of the elements can be an essential element of a sufficient subset containing only five of the original set of six, which fits the extended version of a NESS condition. The justification behind this can be rendered more conceptually palatable in considering this analogy: suppose the requirement for E was not five people but five kilograms, and a seven-kilogram block was put on the scale. Which two kilograms were nonessential? This is a senseless question.

II

So far, I have discussed one account of the sort of causal relation that needs to obtain between X and outcomes in R in order to say that X has control over R and have outlined what I think is a substantially more accurate description. Now I come back to the original question: is there such a thing as moral luck?

The problem Nagel thinks is most troubling and that Rosen responds to does go away. There seems to be no situation where one would be held morally responsible and yet cannot be said to have control (in the sense of NESS control). However, this should not be surprising since what matters for the problem of moral luck is how the definition of control is formulated. Both proximal control and NESS control are defined as a relation between the internal states of X and an outcome in R, and this relation is the key to the solution of the problem. When control is defined this way, both luck in antecedent circumstances (the fact that, according to a deterministic view, the internal states of X are determined by things other than X) and constitutive luck do not matter when considering whether or not X
Luck in circumstances, in what sort of moral problem one may face, also does not matter since control is now defined as a relation to the moral problems we do face. Luck in outcomes is very neatly explained by the theory of NESS control since it becomes the fact that X may not have control over other necessary elements of the sufficient set for some outcome in R. This is the case with the assassin and the bird—an obstruction-less path for the bullet to follow can be seen as a necessary condition in the sufficient set of which the assassin’s decision to pull the trigger is also a necessary condition, and whether or not that condition is present is, to some degree, up to luck. But if that condition is absent, X does not have control over some outcome in R, because that outcome does not obtain—there is no sufficient set. Or, if the outcome does obtain, it is due to a sufficient set of which X is not an element.

One can state the condition of control these ways: “For X to be morally responsible for an outcome in R, X must at least be responsible for that outcome in R,” or “for X to be morally responsible for an outcome in R, R must at least be attributable to X.” This is obvious, but only if a specific notion of responsibility is used, which is precisely the notion that is contained in the idea of NESS control (as opposed, for example, to a notion of responsibility that is jeopardized when we take into account the fact that internal states of X may be determined by things other than X—the kind that Rosen is aiming for in talking about “ultimate control”). The condition of control only asks whether or not X was part of the causal history of R (or whether X could have been part of the causal history of R in cases where X is morally responsible by omission, such as negligence). This is what NESS control gives us, so the condition of control no longer implies “moral luck” in this sense.

However, moral judgment is not out of the woods yet. Even though we now have a notion of control that allows us to give moral judgments when we do have control and suspend them when we do not, there is still a sense in which the distribution of control over various outcomes seems arbitrary. Instead of worrying that we blame people for that which is outside their control, we must worry that who gets control over what—and thus who has the opportunity to be moral or immoral in certain situations—is due to luck. This problem may not be as detrimental to our idea of morality as the previous problem of moral luck but is nevertheless pervasive.
As a condition of moral responsibility, control can determine whether or not a person has moral responsibility in some particular instance. If the agent does not have control over some outcome, he or she cannot be held morally accountable for it, whereas if the agent does have control, that person can be at least considered as a candidate for moral responsibility. But of course, control over outcomes is not evenly distributed among people, nor would we expect it to be. This uneven distribution of control, however, unevenly alters opportunities for moral action as well.

Consider the case where an athlete and a person in a wheelchair are strolling together on a street and come across a house on fire with a person screaming from a second-story window. It is obvious that the stairs are the only timely method of reaching and saving this person. The athlete springs into action, running up the smoky stairs and carrying the distressed tenant to safety while the person in a wheelchair looks helplessly on. The athlete is the moral hero in this situation, and since the person in the wheelchair does not have control over the fate of the inhabitant, he or she is entirely excused from moral judgment. That person did nothing wrong but nothing right either, precisely because of a lack of control over the situation. It seems that the person in the wheelchair simply does not have the opportunity to be as moral as the athlete, which is an affront to the view of morality as giving equal opportunity for advancement. The handicapped person is unlucky in the amount of moral control he or she has.

Certain objections specific to this situation might be raised. The person in the wheelchair might do something else that carries moral value, like call for the fire department. He or she even has a comparative advantage in calling for help, but that does not erase the fact that this avenue of moral action is closed off to him or her whereas the athlete could also call for help. The wheelchair is not only a physical handicap, but a moral handicap as well. We can even take the difference to the extreme and compare Superman to the main character from Dalton Trumbo’s Johnny Got His Gun, who is limbless and faceless after a WWI battle (9–11). He cannot even speak. Superman can save entire cities, but Johnny, though still a person, is almost morally inert. If we are held morally accountable for what

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9 To use our stricter notion of NESS control, the lack of working legs prevents the person in the wheelchair from ascending the stairs (in a timely manner, at least), which forms a necessary condition for saving that person. If the person in the wheelchair had tried to ascend the staircase, he or she would have failed.
we do, as both Rosen and Nagel attest (Rosen; Nagel 455), and Johnny cannot do anything, then he cannot be a moral (or immoral) person. Thus, he becomes morally handicapped: he is impaired such that we suspend moral judgment, which, in a broad sense, is due to luck.

Note that it is not necessary for one to be permanently handicapped for one to be unlucky with regard to control; a handicap is simply the most obvious way to lose such control. One could also simply happen to be absent for a great many moral tests through no fault of one’s own. Handicaps are simply persistent, unlucky conditions that diminish control.

This is a somewhat uncomfortable consequence. If one happens to get into a bad accident and wind up in a wheelchair, no one seems to think that this should diminish one’s ability to be a moral person in the same way it has diminished one’s ability to play basketball. Of course, there are ways to be moral other than by using one’s legs, but those opportunities were open to you before as well. One might argue that handicaps simply offer different opportunities to be moral—being in a wheelchair might increase one’s opportunities to be a moral person in some situations where only those in wheelchairs can do some morally relevant action. But this is only due to the wheelchair; a fully abled person sitting in the wheelchair would be in the same position. A handicap, by itself, reduces possibilities for action, and thus reduces, if only by so little, the scope of moral responsibility.

Mental handicaps seem to have an even more intuitive effect on moral responsibility, sometimes reducing the scope of moral responsibility to a vanishing point. Strawson identifies mental handicaps as often excusing persons from moral consideration since they tend to undermine

10 One might object that a drunk driver hitting a pedestrian is both handicapped (in a sense) and morally responsible. Although the drunk driver has diminished control, he still has a degree of control. This specific example is imprecise as the driver is in fact morally responsible for two things: choosing to drive in that state and hitting the pedestrian. Also, one, who through no fault of one’s own, falls into a state resembling intoxication moments before hitting a pedestrian is less responsible as he does not have much control. (I thank Alan Feuerlein for this objection.)

11 A person in a wheelchair may have opportunities for moral action specific not to the handicap itself but as a handicapped person, such as the ability to empathize (and not just sympathize) with other handicapped people. These are important opportunities that are not available to fully abled people, but I would argue that they only demonstrate the limits of this specific example as the idea is that there can be some conditions that remove control more completely, as with Johnny.
normal interpersonal attitudes (Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* 16–17). If only those who can relate to others on an interpersonal level can be moral agents, and if we do not see schizophrenics as able to engage with us on this level (perhaps we see them instead as the product of forces beyond their control), then we also do not usually consider them to be moral agents. They seem to lack a necessary capacity for self-control which makes it unsuitable to respond to any of their actions with moral blame or approval, all of which seems perfectly obvious. But Johnny simply has a different problem of control in that, although we regard him as a person, he does not seem to have control over anything; he may be a moral agent, but he will never do anything that is blameworthy or praiseworthy. In this way, neither the schizophrenic nor Johnny have the opportunity to do anything of a moral nature if we agree with Rosen and Nagel that one may only be held accountable for what one does. Contrary to the Kantian view, it is simply not possible for these people to be morally praised or blamed as much as others might.

The contention above invites counterarguments, and I see two ways one might attack it: one of which is to deny that there is a problem in saying that physical handicaps that do not affect one’s personhood turn into moral handicaps, either by denying that physical handicaps reduce control in this morally relevant way or by asserting that such a reduction does not amount to much. The first of these objections does not account for the condition of control: if a person cannot have control over an outcome, then that person cannot be morally praised or blamed for that outcome. The less a person has control over, the less he or she has the opportunity to be a moral or immoral person; although the difference may be slight for most physical or even mental handicaps, it exists nonetheless. The second objection, that such a disparity does not matter, still entails denying that morality is a sphere in life in which everyone has an equal opportunity to become worthy, which is exactly the implication of the position that one can have luck in control. Either there is such a thing as luck in control, and it matters a great deal, or there is no such thing.

The second attack is far more interesting; it asserts in fine Kantian fashion that the proper object for moral approbation is not the action but the intention behind it. Thus, all who qualify as moral agents still have the

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12 This article will hereafter be cited by the author’s last name followed by the page number.
general capacity for such intentions, so handicaps to a person’s control do not matter: either they remove the ability to be a moral agent or they do not affect moral judgments. But such intentions must still be subject to the condition of control if we are to be held accountable for them. Unfortunately, the degree of control a person may have over such intentions seems to vary as arbitrarily (that is, with as much luck) across people as control over physical actions does.

In order to clarify the discussion about just what it means to have control over an intention, I will draw on some terminology. Harry Frankfurt makes a distinction between first-order and second-order desires and defines ‘volition’ as an effective desire: one that becomes one’s will or leads to action (“Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person” 6). First-order desires refer to a desire to do some action, while second-order desires refer to the desire to have some other desire, like the struggling drug addict who has a first-order desire to take a drug and a second-order desire to be the sort of person who does not want to take the drug (Frankfurt 7). A second-order volition is a desire that some motivation be one’s will, that is, that this motivation be the one that truly moves one to action, and it is the capacity to have these second-order volitions that Frankfurt regards as essential to personhood (Frankfurt 10).

Consider two killers, X and Y. X is a bad person beyond doubt; he or she wants to kill someone and truly identifies with this desire so that the desires of all orders are the same. Y is remorseful; he or she wants to kill someone yet also wants to be the sort of person who does not have this desire. Now, it should be noted that because remorseful killers are treated more leniently than unremorseful ones, we have at least a strong indication that intentions, even second-order intentions, do matter in making moral judgments (if one is allowed to approximate moral judgments by legal judgments in some cases). In any case, it is the first-order intention that matters more. We can say that Y has control over this first-order intention if Y’s second-order volition satisfies NESS control—that is, whether or not Y identifies with a first-order desire affects (and is somehow necessary for)

13 This article will be henceforth be referred to by the author’s last name followed by the page number.

14 I’ll not defend the terms themselves in this paper as regardless I find them useful in talking about desires as intentions.
which first-order intentions and desires are realized. ‘Volition’ is an important term since it implies that one wants one’s will to be different, that one identifies with a will one does not currently have. It is not simply a desire to experience some other desire. Admittedly, the original language of NESS control seems convoluted when talking about psychological causation, but the idea of a “necessary element” is still relevant.

Thus, failure of a second-order volition to bring about the change of a first-order desire demonstrates a lack of control over that desire. This is what it means to have self-control: to be able to make second-order volitions effective. A true addict—one whose desire is seen as the result of forces now beyond his or her control—is the paradigm model for a lack of this control, and also for how we might judge actions and intentions separately: although we do prosecute people for actions done in pursuit of a drug, we do not necessarily blame them in the same way for their inability to make good on their desire to stop taking the drug.

Thus, one who consistently kills and yet desires not to be a killer seems to exhibit the same inability to make second-order volitions effective. This specific ability has a name in common parlance: willpower. This is something, as Nagel points out in talking about “constitutive luck,” that seems a composite of genetic and environmental factors of which individual decisions play only a small part. How much willpower one has and to what extent one is able to control various first-order desires are largely due to luck.

Do we lay moral blame on others for intentions, desires, and wills over which they have no control? Here, the correct answer seems a little vague. Most likely our attitudes in such situations change: during WWI, shellshock was officially considered a problem of cowardice, but now post-traumatic stress disorder is a medical condition. However, I believe it is safe to say that, absent some medical condition, like schizophrenia or kleptomania, the general norm is that one should have control over one’s intentions. This is essentially what Strawson argues in Freedom and Resentment: as long as people are viewed as having this general capacity for self-control, they are deemed responsible for their intentions (Strawson 12). However, it certainly seems too simplistic to say that one either has this general capacity or does not; one may have it to a greater or lesser extent and more or less in some areas rather than others. For example, one person
may not be able to control his or her desire to cheat on his or her spouse as well as others can control their desire, and yet the first person may be more able to follow a dietary regimen. Again, willpower varies across people largely according to luck.

If control over intentions varies in the same way as with what people do, then intentions fall prey to the same problem of luck in control. Those with more willpower, or a greater general capacity for self-control, or more ability to make second-order volitions effective are in a better position to have control over their intentions.

Kant wrote in his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* that the good will was the supreme value, a shining jewel no matter what may unluckily befall it (3). That could be true, but it does not imply that everyone can aspire to a jewel of the same brightness. Some jewels, through sheer luck, are just duller than others, no matter how finely they are polished. Gideon Rosen offers a sketch of an idea of control that looked like it might have solved the problem of moral luck, but even after filling in and redrawing some of the lines on this sketch, it appears that this model solves one concern about luck entering into moral judgments and creates another. But perhaps this second problem, that one can be lucky or unlucky in being gifted or handicapped in morality as in any other sphere of life, may turn out to be less of a problem than a brutal fact that may come into acceptance.
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I N “On Denoting” and “On Referring,” Bertrand Russell and P.F. Strawson present two distinct theories of denoting phrases. Both theories try to solve the problems created by sentences that do not have existing subjects. How can sentences like ‘the king of France is wise’ be meaningful if there is no king of France? Russell’s theory uses variables to try to better understand how sentences can be meaningful if their denoting phrases denote something that does not exist. In “On Referring,” P.F. Strawson rejects Russell’s solution and suggests an alternate theory that seems to better reflect the way we use denoting phrases. Despite the intuitive appeal of Strawson’s theory, Strawson’s formulation of an expression’s meaning is flawed. In this paper, I will briefly outline Russell’s and Strawson’s theories, explain why Strawson’s theory might seem more effective, and examine Strawson’s problematic proposal for the meaning of expressions.

Russell’s theory states that phrases denote solely by virtue of their grammatical form (Russell, “On Denoting” 212).¹ According to this theory, denoting phrases may potentially denote objects that do not exist—like the queen of America—merely because they have the correct grammatical form of denoting phrases. However, if this is the case, how do phrases with correct denoting form function when they refer to nonexistent objects? ‘The queen of England’ clearly has a meaning and a denotation. However, ‘the queen of America,’ although of the same grammatical form, seems to

¹ This article will be cited by the author’s last name followed by the page number.

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have a meaning but no denotation. Russell suggests that denoting phrases like ‘the queen of America’ never have any meaning in themselves, but the propositions in which they occur do have meaning. The proposition gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless denoting phrase (Russell 213). ‘The queen of America’ does not have meaning, but when used in the proposition ‘the queen of America is nice,’ it can be meaningful.

Russell uses logical paraphrases to illustrate how propositions with nonexistent subjects function. By paraphrasing propositions into expressions using variables, Russell shows how propositions with nonexistent subjects can be understood. In Russell’s system, if the phrase ‘I met a man’ is true, it can be translated to ‘‘I met x, and x is human” is not always false.’ By paraphrasing these propositions into existential statements, Russell shifts the emphasis from the denoting phrase to the proposition expressed about it. In ‘the queen of America is nice,’ the important point is not the existence of the queen of America; rather, it is the proposition ‘is nice.’ This system of paraphrasing allows Russell to solve some of the paradoxes that arise in the philosophy of language.

Because of its effectiveness in solving problems presented by phrases that denote nonexistent objects, Russell’s solution seems to help us better understand the way denoting phrases work because it explains how we can talk meaningfully about nonexistent objects. Rather than talk about things that do not exist, we talk about a set of concepts that may or may not apply to a variable x. But Russell’s theory, although logically strong and effective in solving several of the difficulties of denoting phrases, does not seem to completely reflect the way we use language (Russell 213–216).

In “On Referring,” Strawson rejects the theory Russell presents in “On Denoting” because Russell’s theory argues that referring, or denoting, is something an expression does. For example, the expression ‘the queen of America’ refers to, or denotes, a certain individual, solely by virtue of its form. Strawson thinks this misunderstanding leads Russell to try to account for the meaningfulness of sentences with nonexistent subjects. Russell’s theory solves the problems he intends to solve. But Strawson thinks it solves them in the wrong way because it does not correctly reflect the way we refer and the way we use denoting phrases.

Before we proceed, it is important to describe Strawson’s distinctions among an expression, its use, and its utterance. First, an expression is a word or set of words that gives directions so it can be used to refer to
objects (Strawson, “On Referring” 231). Expressions include ‘The queen of America,’ ‘I,’ ‘he,’ and ‘my brother.’ These expressions do not have meaning in themselves. They have meaning in the way they are used in propositions to refer to people or things. Second, the use of an expression is the way an expression is used to refer to a particular person or object in language. If I say that I am writing, the expression ‘I’ has a different use than if Jeff Johnson says, “I am writing.” The first use refers to me; the second use, although the same expression is used, refers to a different person. Third, an utterance is any instance in which an expression is used, regardless of its use. In this paper, I will focus on Strawson’s first two distinctions, an expression and the use of an expression, because they are critical to understanding Strawson’s criticism of Russell’s theory.

Russell errs, Strawson claims, because he confuses meaning and reference (Strawson 232). Russell assumes that the meaning of an expression must be the object to which it refers, or the reference (Strawson 233). If the meaning of an expression is the object to which it refers, all expressions that refer to nonexistent objects become meaningless unless you paraphrase them as Russell does. But this seems contrary to language’s normal use. Expressions that refer to nonexistent objects only seem problematic when they are used in sentences that imply existence. His theory stumbles because Russell believes that expressions refer independently of their use.

Strawson argues that expressions do not refer; people use expressions to refer. The referent of the expression ‘the king of France’ depends on when the expression is used. If the expression had been used during the reign of Louis XIV, it would refer to an entirely different person than if it had been used when Louis XV was the king. The use of the expression determines the referent, not the expression itself. Another example is the expression ‘I.’ The expression ‘I’ can only be correctly used self-referentially. I cannot correctly use the expression ‘I’ to refer to someone else. Although ‘I’ has a correct way of being used, it does not have a built in meaning or referent. The object, or person, to which ‘I’ refers depends on who uses it. Strawson claims that it does not make sense to say the expression ‘I’ refers to a particular person, because it can refer to any user of the expression (Strawson 228–232).

2 This article will henceforth be cited by the author’s last name followed by the page number.
Referring, Strawson argues, is a function of the use of an expression; meaning, however, is a function of the expression itself. Strawson claims that to give the meaning of an expression is to give general directions for its use, or reference. The meaning of the expression ‘I’ is that it is correctly used to refer to its user. The meaning gives the directions that the expression ‘I’ should only be used by the speaker self-referentially. Consequently, Strawson argues, the meaning of an expression has nothing to do with whether the expression is being used to refer to something that exists. Meaning is a part of the expression, but not in the way we usually think (Stawson 232–233). If we say that someone does not understand what an expression means, we do not (normally) mean that he does not understand the words or letters that make up the expression. We normally mean, rather, that he does not understand how the expression should be used. If someone uses ‘I’ to talk about someone other than himself, he does not understand the meaning of the expression. In Strawson’s terms, he misunderstands the directions for its use.

Strawson’s distinction between an expression and the use of an expression seems to better reflect the way we use denoting phrases. For instance, ‘that’ does not seem to have a built-in referent. The referent of an expression depends on the context of its use and the intention of the speaker. If someone were to ask, “What does ‘that’ mean?” it would be hard to respond appropriately because the meaning of ‘that’ is almost entirely dependent on its use. Similarly, if I were to tell someone that ‘I’ had a different meaning for me from the meaning it had for her, she would likely be confused. Yes, ‘I’ may refer to different people, but it does not seem that it means something different for everyone. Otherwise, we might ask someone what ‘I’ means, and they would say, “It means him and her and him and her . . .” But this type of answer would certainly seem odd. ‘I’ surely has a different referent depending on who uses it, but it does not seem correct to say that ‘I’ has a different meaning for everyone.

Because Strawson distinguishes between meaning and reference, as well as expression and use, nonexistent subjects in subject-predicate sentences are not as damaging to the proper function of denoting phrases as they are in Russell’s theory of denoting phrases. Russell was forced to paraphrase this type of sentence into existential logical notation in order to effectively make sense of referent-less sentences. Under Strawson’s theory, the meanings of expressions are only problematic if they are ineffective in
giving general directions for their use (Strawson 232). Because the use of an expression determines its reference, a referent-less expression is only troublesome if it is used incorrectly.

The expression ‘the queen of America’ is not dangerous on its own—as an expression. It is only dangerous when it is used incorrectly. This point is effectively illustrated in the following exchange between Porthos and D’Artagnon in the Disney movie “The Three Musketeers”:

“This sash was a gift to me from the queen of America,” Porthos says.
“There’s no queen of America!” replies D’Artagnon.
“I beg to differ; we are on quite intimate terms, if you can prove otherwise,” Porthos responds. (The Three Musketeers)

According to Strawson’s theory, the meaning of ‘the queen of America’ is the set of rules, habits, and conventions for its use in referring (Strawson 233), or the general directions for its use to refer to particular objects or persons (Strawson 232). For Porthos, his claim that the queen of America gave him the sash seems both meaningful and referential, even though the queen of America does not exist. Porthos’s use of this expression ‘the queen of America’ illustrates a potential flaw in Strawson’s theory. How does one account for vagueness in the general directions given by the expression ‘the queen of America’? Do some expressions give better directions for their use than others? If to give the meaning of an expression is to give general directions for its proper and correct use, how does one account for the seemingly incorrect ways expressions are used (Strawson 232)? Porthos may have followed the directions given him by the expression ‘the queen of America,’ but D’Artagnon seems to have misinterpreted the use of the sentence. There seems to be problematic vagueness in Strawson’s explication of the meaning of an expression. Either that, or people fail to understand the built-in directions of expressions.

I propose that Strawson’s characterization of the meaning of an expression is problematic because many expressions are vague and, consequently, ineffective in the way they give directions for their use. Strawson even claims that the same expression can be used to refer to innumerable things (Strawson 233). If the same expression has the capability to refer to innumerable things, is the meaning of the expression faulty—i.e., are its directions for its use incoherent or overly vague? This seems to be a double-edge...
sword. If you make the meaning of an expression too narrow, you cut out
the validity of expressions that may not yet fit into the meaning of an
expression. ‘The king of France,’ if meaningful as an expression, needs to
give the conventions for its use in referring. It would seem that directions
for its use must be broad enough to successfully guide not only present
uses, but also past and potential future uses of the expression.

If the meaning of an expression is too vague, however, it may not be
able to rule out incorrect uses of the expression. To refer to Porthos’s use
of the expression ‘the queen of America,’ our first impulse may be that he
must have misunderstood the meaning of the expression, for surely a cor-
rect use of an expression cannot refer to someone that does not exist.
While this may be a stretch, how can we know all the possible meanings, or
directions, for every expression? Maybe Porthos is using ‘queen’ to refer to
something that is preeminent among a certain category rather than to an
actual royal person. Maybe ‘the queen of America,’ as Porthos uses it, refers
to the woman he feels is the superior woman of America. It does not seem
that there is one universal intrinsic meaning in all meaningful expressions.
Or, if expressions have intrinsic meaning as Strawson suggests, many peo-
ple do not know how to follow the directions given for their correct use.
Either the implicit directions in an expression are unreliable, or people do
not know how to correctly understand the proper use of expressions. Both
possibilities are troublesome.

D’Artagnon claims that there is no queen of America. Unless
Porthos is lying, which may be possible, he believes that there is a queen of
America. It is possible that he misinterprets the directions given him by the
expression, but it may be the case that the meaning of a denoting phrase is
not the directions for its correct use to refer to an object. Although there
may not be a queen of America as many would interpret to be the expres-
sion’s proper use (a female sovereign), Porthos’s statement does not seem
to be an incorrect use of the expression, unless there is some fixed referent
of the expression.

Strawson errs because he believes there is something built in to an
expression that gives directions for its use. He criticizes Russell for misat-
tributing the role of referring to the expression, not the expresser. But
Strawson is still unable to take away the referential role of the expression
entirely. He argues that to give the meaning of an expression is to give direc-
tions for its correct use and that the function of the use of an expression is
to refer. Strawson’s attempt to characterize the meaning of an expression as the general directions for its proper use is interesting, but has the unstated assumption that there is a limited number of things that an expression can refer to correctly. He says that the same expression may be used to refer to innumerable things, but this idea does not fit the way we normally use denoting phrases. It is also hard to believe that the same expression can correctly refer to innumerable things if the directions given by the expression are effective.

Strawson’s theory of denoting phrases—particularly his distinction between an expression and its use—seems to better represent the way we think about and use language. It is an effective criticism and counterproposal to Russell’s theory. However, his idea that the meaning of an expression is the general directions for its use to refer to objects seems problematic and vague. The meanings of expressions need to have more certitude than the directions for their proper use. Otherwise, there will continue to be the dispute about expressions with seemingly nonexistent referents when they are used in a seemingly proper and correct way. Not only because the expression is referring to a nonexistent object or person, but because people will struggle to correctly interpret the meaning—or directions—of an expression.
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At first blush, it might seem mysterious why anyone would begin smoking tobacco. Smoking increases the risk of a litany of harms: from cancer and heart disease, to reduced fitness and lung function, to impotence and infertility (Arthur Musk and Nicholas de Klerk, “History of Tobacco and Health” 287–88). It is an expensive and often addictive habit. It is clear why James I of England called smoking a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black, stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless. (qtd. in Musk and de Klerk 288)

Despite the risks of smoking, however, I believe that some philosophers overstate or misstate the case against it. In this essay, I will consider two arguments offered by Derek Parfit and J. David Velleman—both hold that smoking is immoral. Parfit argues that smoking is immoral because it impermissibly restricts and harms one’s future selves (Reasons and Persons 319–320). Velleman argues that smoking, since it constitutes “trading one’s person in exchange for benefits,” fails to meet the Kantian requirement to respect personhood (Velleman, “A Right of Self-Termination?” 614).

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reconstruct these arguments and argue that they both lead to similarly implausible and restrictive conclusions. While smoking is often wrong, it is not wrong for the reasons Parfit and Velleman offer us.

I am not a smoker, nor do I think smoking is wise. Why, then, do I choose to challenge these arguments against it? First, I find it interesting that Parfit and Velleman, in broader works devoted to a wide range of topics, both discuss smoking and take a similarly hard line against it. Parfit, in *Reasons and Persons*, is presenting an innovative and well-argued version of utilitarianism, while Velleman’s “A Right of Self-Termination?” makes an argument in the Kantian tradition against failing to respect one’s personhood. I am curious about what feature of smoking makes it so apparently deplorable that it brings two widely disparate theoretical pictures into agreement.

Second, I think there may be more to smoking than *akrasia*, addiction, willful ignorance, or even purely hedonistic pleasure. In some cases, smoking constitutes a genuinely meaningful part of an individual’s personal aesthetic. Richard Klein, for example, suggests that the moment of taking a cigarette allows one to open a parenthesis in the time of ordinary experience, a space and a time of heightened attention . . . evoked through the ritual of fire, smoke, cinder connecting to hand, lungs, breath, and mouth.

(Richard Klein, *Cigarettes are Sublime* 16)

Smoking can also express one’s identity or serve as a marker for values and beliefs: Patricia Berman suggests that during the Bohemian period of the late nineteenth century cigarettes “constituted an emblem of Bohemian or Decadent culture” as well as performed numerous other important functions of social significance (Patricia Berman, “Edvard Munch’s Self-Portrait with Cigarette: Smoking and the Bohemian Persona” 627). Smoking may produce some positive health effects, such as greater resistance to neurodegenerative disease and inhibition of acne and herpes blisters (Ronni Wolf, et al. “Smoking Can be Good for You” 108–109). Smoking also provides self-medication benefits for some schizophrenics (Veena Kumari and Peggy Postma, “Nicotine use in schizophrenia: The self medication hypotheses”). These effects, while they do not outweigh the harms of smoking in general, may do so for individuals who care especially about the benefits in question.
Ultimately, my aim is not to defend smoking, but rather to suggest that Parfit’s and Velleman’s arguments do not make the best case against it. (I think an appeal to the harms smoking inflicts on others, and the addictive nature of cigarettes, might be more effective.) I will argue that both Parfit’s and Velleman’s views, as stated, ask us to sacrifice too much of our autonomy and our right to engage in risky projects and activities that could lead to our being harmed or disabled; this theoretical flaw affects not only their attitudes towards smoking, but their stances towards other, more important human aims and goals. Ultimately, part of what it means to be a person is to be free to autonomously choose projects, even when they seem to be projects that will shorten our lives or curtail their quality. I think that Parfit and Velleman underrate this feature of personhood in their arguments and miss the mark as a result.

Velleman’s and Parfit’s Views

Velleman begins “A Right of Self-Termination?” with a vignette. This vignette, which at first glance seems to be a bare moral intuition based on personal experience, is used to argue that smoking is morally wrong:

Getting cancer changed my feelings about people who smoke. I remember hearing a fellow philosopher expound, with a wave of his cigarette, on his right to choose whether to live and die smoking, or to quit and merely survive. I was just beginning a year of chemotherapy, and mere survival sounded pretty good to me. But I was the visiting speaker, and my hosts were unaware of my diagnosis. Several of them lit up after dinner as we listened to their colleague’s disquisition—they with amused familiarity, I with an outrage that surprised even me and would have baffled them, if I had dared to express it. (Velleman 606)

Rather than bracketing his reaction as a personal outrage against smoking, Velleman uses the story as a starting point for arguing that smoking is universally immoral.

Velleman first reconstructs an argument for the permissibility of smoking, representing the right to smoke as following from a proposed right “to live and die in the light of . . . [one’s] own conclusions about why
[one’s] life is valuable and where its value lies” (Ronald Dworkin, et al. “Assisted Suicide: The Philosophers’ Brief” 41–47, qtd. in Velleman 607). This right, Velleman thinks, relies on two premises:

(1) “A person has the right to make his own life shorter in order to make it better—to make it shorter, that is, if doing so is a necessary means or consequence of making it a better life on the whole for him” (Velleman 607).

(2) “There is a presumption in favor of deferring to a person’s judgment on the subject of his own good” (Velleman 607).

Velleman then argues for another principle that potentially conflicts with (1)—morality does not countenance actions that fail to respect the dignity of persons. Furthermore, according to Velleman, what determines the dignity of a person is not up to that person:

The dignity of a person is a value that differs in kind from his interest. Unlike his interest, for example, his dignity is a value on which his opinion carries no more weight than anyone else’s. Because this value does not accrue to him, he is in no better position to judge it than others. (Velleman 611)

Since dignity is not a value about which agents have a say—it is not part of an agent’s “own good”—premise (2) cannot come into action.

Velleman then makes the overly quick move that life-shortening in general threatens the dignity of persons; thus, since principle (1) permits life-shortening acts, it violates the maxim that we must respect the dignity of persons. Since, on Velleman’s view, the dignity-of-persons principle is a core moral principle on which all others—including (1)—depend, we must abandon (1) because it undermines the principle on which it depends. Lastly, since invoking a right to smoke depends in turn on (1) there is no right to smoke:

I think Kant was right to say that trading one’s person in exchange for benefits, or relief from harms, denigrates the value of personhood, respect for which is a criterion of morality (Kant would say, the criterion). That’s why I think that smoking is a vice—at least, when practiced for the reasons given by my host. (Velleman 606)
On Velleman’s view, smoking is wrong because it fails to respect the universal value of personhood.

In contrast to Velleman’s vignette, Parfit begins his objection to smoking with a much simpler and more abstract set of moves; he presents a simple example:

Reconsider a boy who starts to smoke, knowing and hardly caring that this may cause him to suffer greatly fifty years later. This boy does not identify with his future self. His attitude towards his future self is in some ways like his attitude to other people. This analogy makes it easier to believe that his act is morally wrong. We should claim that it is wrong to impose on anyone, including such a future self, the risk of such a death. (Parfit 319–20)

Parfit’s evaluation of this situation relies on his metaphysics of personal identity, which claims that a person’s life can be subdivided into the lives of a set of successive selves. He states that seeing identity in this way “has long seemed natural, when there is some marked weakening of psychological connectedness” (Parfit 319–20, 305). Since Parfit believes that identity consists in relations of psychological continuity and connectedness, breakdowns in these relations over time will produce a successive-selves model of identity: “After such a weakening, my future self will seem alien to me now” (Parfit 319–20).

When Parfit’s theory of identity is conjoined with the harm of smoking, the conclusion that smoking is wrong seems to follow. Parfit suggests, “We ought not to do to our future selves what it would be wrong to do to other people” (Parfit 320). If future selves really are like other persons, this principle would be obvious: if my smoking affected you the way it affects me, it would seem an impermissible imposition on you; no smoker should force others to smoke. Ultimately on Parfit’s view, smoking is wrong because it imposes impermissible risks on others. While for Velleman it does not matter whether dignity violations affect oneself or others, for Parfit one actually becomes (in a sense) the “others” whom one should not negatively affect.
The Restriction of Autonomy

Smoking is an appealing example for Velleman’s and Parfit’s views because it involves putting a dangerous substance into one’s body. Smoking clearly shortens one’s life and does to oneself what no one ought to impose on others. However, despite these life-shortening effects, many smokers find smoking a valuable activity; thus, I suggest that we must take the positive value that some smokers place on smoking into account as well. Given some smokers’ desire to smoke and endorsement of smoking as valuable, my first worry against Velleman’s and Parfit’s arguments is that they produce conclusions that are extremely restrictive of personal autonomy. Although Parfit grants that his theory “reduces the claims of personal autonomy,” I am concerned the effects will be far more devastating to autonomy than he believes (Parfit 320).

I want to motivate this worry by reference to a practical case. My example will also be one of placing a harmful substance into one’s body; however, rather than consider the consumption of tobacco, I want to consider the consumption of food. Consuming food is, for most persons, a far more central source of enjoyment than tobacco smoking. More than this, food consumption is central to innumerable cultural and religious practices and plays a crucial part in forming and cementing familial and interpersonal relations: consider the importance of dining with one’s family, or of “breaking bread” together with one’s comrades. Food, in fact, along with clothing and shelter, is considered one of the core human needs.

However, it is certainly true that what types of food one consumes can affect the length of one’s life, most likely as much as smoking can if not more so. As Sugimura states, “Three major factors for human carcinogenesis are cigarette smoking, infection and inflammation, and nutrition and dietary carcinogens” (Takashi Sugimura, “Nutrition and dietary carcinogens” 387). Furthermore, people do not need to engage in extraordinarily risky practices in order to put themselves at risk of death: the dietary carcinogens Sugimura discusses are not produced by esoteric or exclusively harmful substances, but by commonly consumed and even staple food products such as grilled meat and fish, cured sausages, cultivated mushrooms, and citrus fruits (Sugimura). One might bite the bullet (or the tofu) and give up these foods. However, it is probable that extreme caloric
restriction extends the length of human life (George S. Roth, et al. “Caloric Restriction in Primates and Relevance to Humans” 305). Thus, assuming caloric restriction does lengthen life, our choice not to consume a reduced-calorie diet shortens our life spans and causes us to begin aging earlier than we otherwise would.

Thus, Velleman’s argument seems to imply that choosing anything other than essential nutrition, if it is likely to make your life shorter, shows disrespect for the value of personhood. Parfit’s argument, meanwhile, suggests that choosing to consume these foods runs the risk of imposing harms on future selves, harms that we would not impose on others. Yet this argument threatens to mandate a world in which persons live in bubbles, eating calorie-restricted diets and refusing to participate in risky projects. Worse, persons who provide foods that have life-shortening potential would be engaging, on Velleman’s account, in an “immoral enterprise” (Velleman 614).

Velleman could attempt to distinguish smoking from eating by providing a definition of a sufficiently long life. On this view, smoking would be immoral because it makes one’s life too short, but eating would not be immoral because eating a normal diet does not decrease lifespan below some arbitrary minimum, even though not eating a normal diet would extend one’s life further. Just as Velleman might save his claim by providing a definition of sufficiently long life, Parfit could try to provide a definition of ‘acceptable risk,’ where there are some risks that are acceptable to impose on others (including future selves), while other risks may not be imposed. Smoking, on my revision of Parfit’s view, could fall into the latter category.

The above attempt to distinguish smoking from eating by appealing to risk is too arbitrary. Different levels of risk may seem more acceptable to some people than others, and risks may be taken on for different reasons. It is possible that, for example, a sumo wrestler’s lifespan is shorter than a smoker’s lifespan, and certainly shorter than an average office worker’s lifespan. Yet telling a sumo wrestler that engaging in sumo wrestling is wrong because the weight gain involved runs the risk of shortening his lifespan and thus

4 Note that some persons have thought this about fast food establishments— but Velleman’s view seems to license this objection equally (if not more so) against Le Cirque or some other five-star French restaurant serving bearnaise sauces.
violates his dignity seems wrong. And condemning a sumo wrestler for inflicting health problems and excessive weight on a future self seems equally wrong. A chef who prepares deadly Japanese puffer fish or a deep-water diver should be equally free to pursue their projects. While my argument is so far as intuition-based as Velleman’s, I suggest in the next section that it has a theoretical basis. Furthermore, the idea of a minimally acceptable life-length or an allowable risk amount seems contradictory to the idea that persons have absolute dignity or that future selves may never be treated in ways that we would not treat others.

In the end, both Parfit and Velleman seem committed to the view that people who engage in lives that are riskier than the safest possible life are doing something morally wrong. Such a normative claim strikes me as both unattractive and incorrect. While having personhood implies the possibility of losing it, a life lived merely with the aim of maximizing its length and minimizing the risk of harm seems a poor one.

**Theoretical Worries and Conclusions**

More theoretical is the worry that the case of food consumption shows that the move from larger theoretical principles (to which Parfit and Velleman are committed) to condemnations of particular acts or act-classes as immoral looks poorly founded. Let us say that we accept Velleman’s claim that we are under a duty to respect the dignity of persons, whether in our own person or in others. Equally imagine that we accept Parfit’s metaphysics of identity, where persons are successive selves over time. What I suggest is that even if we accept these broad principles, they fail to justify the moral restrictions that Parfit and Velleman think they do.

First, I believe that there is good reason to doubt Velleman’s claim that a person does not have the right to make his own life shorter in order to make it better. Velleman’s argument, as we have seen, does not merely imply that one should not unduly endanger one’s life, but that one must aim to make one’s life—one’s “mere survival”—last as long as possible (Velleman 606). But why should we think that lengthening one’s life, or avoiding shortening it, is what preserving the dignity of persons consists in or requires?

Though Velleman claims that “mere survival sounded pretty good to me,” it is not clear how he can get from this view to the view that shortening
one’s life is an insult to the dignity of persons. For those committed to a Kantian dignity-of-persons view, Richard Arneson’s view that each person has “a moral duty to make something worthwhile of her life, something good for herself and others,” seems much more plausible than Velleman’s (“Joel Feinberg and the Justification of Soft Paternalism” 11). Arneson restates Joel Feinberg’s argument that the Kantian stance Velleman embraces, seems to wrongly “make a fetish of rational agency capacity” (Arneson 14). And Jeff McMahan points to the problematic results of Velleman’s position when he observes that Velleman’s Kantian position on suicide also commits Velleman to rejecting anesthesia for pain relief (Ethics of Killing 459). In the same way, I argue that Velleman’s position on smoking makes a fetish out of length of life, and that the result that his position requires caloric-restriction diets is therefore unsurprising.

Similarly, why should we think that future selves can claim the same sorts of rights against us that other persons standardly can? In particular, why can these persons claim a right to have a healthy body held in reserve for them? Parfit equivocates in two ways when he says, “Autonomy does not include the right to impose upon oneself, for no good reason, great harm. We ought to prevent anyone from doing to his future self what it would be wrong to do to other people” (Parfit 321). The two equivocations are about what a “good reason” to impose great harm on oneself would be, and what sort of “other people” the future self is morally analogous to. I will consider them in reverse order, but I believe they are connected issues.

First, are future selves similar to existing persons, or are they other future persons? If future selves are like currently existing persons, we should not impose any risks on them at all. Indeed, since I cannot permissibly impose a risk of death on a present person, I might not even be permitted to bring a future self into existence since that involves imposing a risk of death on that self. Parfit does specify that

our future selves are like future generations. We can affect them for the worse, and sinceconst they do not now exist, they cannot defend themselves. Like future generations, future selves have no vote, so their interests need to be specially protected. (Parfit 319)
However, this introduces massive puzzles about what exactly future selves are entitled to and whether harms (or risks of harms) to future selves should prevent us on moral grounds from engaging in practices for which we do think that we have a good *prima facie* reason—for example, smoking as part of a religious belief or ritual, or as part of a value system or aesthetic.

The question of what obligations we owe future generations cannot be solved simply, but I do not think that future selves and generations have “veto rights” over what present selves and generations do. One might think, for example, that we must not make future selves’ lives worse than nonexistence, or worse than some baseline, which is compatible with coming into existence in a smoker’s body. Determining what future selves would prefer their bodies and histories to be like is also difficult. For these reasons, I am more sympathetic to Feinberg’s suggestion, which Arneson reconstructs.

Suppose young adults would voluntarily choose to develop the habit of smoking cigarettes, perhaps because the practice fits an ideal self-image. Suppose they know that older people tend to disavow these youthful choices and regret the decision to start smoking. The older people, compared with their younger selves, give more weight to the value of good health than to the value of stylish demeanor that conflicts with it. Still, the youths’ voluntary enough choice now is to smoke. In these circumstances, there is no soft paternalist rationale for prohibition of smoking to save the future stages of these people from their present voluntary choices—that would be usurping the rightful role of the present self. In much the same way, people today may voluntarily incur debts that their older selves will regard as unwise, but the contract that gives rise to the debt is not null and void on that account. Nor is there a soft paternalist rationale for banning such contracts. (Arneson 5–6)

This notion of the “rightful role of the present self” is what I think is missing in Parfit, and its absence makes his account of smoking similar to Richard Posner’s claim that the young should often be morally required to be fiduciaries of the interests of the old rather than pursuers of their own interests (Richard Posner, *Aging and Old Age*).

Finally, note that Parfit’s view may allow smoking in some cases where most others would not: if the barriers between selves are not as high,
perhaps earlier selves may permissibly treat future selves unfairly to achieve a greater sum total of happiness—for example, earlier selves may smoke if they highly value smoking, it may bring them more pleasure than it would cost their future selves in terms of pain. Parfit’s consequentialist argument has difficulty explaining why this action is wrong—or worse, why a smoker may not inflict smoking-related harms on entirely separate persons who are not even future selves.\(^7\)

Parfit’s argument against smoking comes very close to the true reasons why smoking can be wrong. Smoking is wrong to the extent that it affects real, existing persons in a way that is impermissible and rights-violating. Whether this justifies prohibiting smoking is a further question: the arguments from the wrongness of inflicting “passive smoking” or environmental smoke on others seem strongest, as opposed to the arguments that smokers require expensive health care (since this could equally be applied to sumo wrestlers or French chefs).

Ultimately, Velleman’s and Parfit’s discussions of smoking suggest a problem with many paternalistic arguments. Many self-affecting practices seem distasteful or imprudent. However, many of these practices are valued by their practitioners, and the same arguments that we raise against these practices can equally be raised against more commonly performed ones. This is not an argument for relativism or egoism: no person, no matter how much she values smoking, may blow smoke in someone else’s face or steal money in order to buy cigarettes. What I do ask for is a greater sensitivity to morally condemning apparently imprudent self-affecting acts: taking a position consistent with Parfit or Velleman requires not just condemning ad hoc those acts others perform that we do not like seeing performed, but also giving up many other practices that we think permissible and even enjoyable. This suggests that we should think twice about whether morality can demand that we (not just “they” or “those wasteful smokers”) give up so much autonomy.\(^8\)

\(^7\) See Parfit 336-345 for a discussion of this issue.

\(^8\) For more on this, see Seana Shiffrin, “Paternalism, Unconscionability Doctrine, and Accommodation,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29 (2000): 205–250
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Søren Kierkegaard focused much of his religious writings on two questions: what does it mean to be a Christian? And how do I become one? Fashioning himself after Socrates, a teacher whom he revered for helping men to discover the truth for themselves, Kierkegaard preferred anonymity over fame. He accordingly wrote the Concluding Unscientific Postscript from the viewpoint of a fictional person named Johannes Climacus, an “ordinary” thirty-year-old man who was “born and bred” in Copenhagen (15). The Postscript, Kierkegaard’s final attempt to anonymously redirect his contemporaries, explores the distinction between objective and subjective truth. A culminating theme in the work is whether one can build an eternal happiness on historical knowledge. By historical knowledge, Climacus refers to concrete facts that we can know through objective study. He unleashes an arsenal of arguments to prove that faith in Jesus Christ is utterly incongruent with objectivity. His various arguments reveal a central belief that though objective truth is valuable in many spheres, it inherently clashes with faith because it denies faith of the passion necessary to pursue salvation. Two of Climacus’s most compelling arguments are the passion-venture argument and the inspiration argument. This paper sets forth the structure of these arguments and discusses how both attempts at objectivity not only

1 Given the divergent views of Kierkegaard’s many pseudonyms, I attribute the ideas and concepts forwarded within the Postscript to Climacus rather than to Kierkegaard himself.
2 I take the names and outlines of these arguments from Professor David L. Paulsen of the BYU Philosophy Department.

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fail to arrive at Christianity, but actually inhibit potential Christians from developing true Christian faith.

The passion-venture argument is powerful because it attacks the essence of the objective route to faith. Climacus charges that objective inquiry strips away the passion necessary for faith. The passion-venture argument is as follows:

1. Authentic Christian faith is directly proportional to the passion of the believer.
2. But a believer’s passion is directly related to his objective uncertainty.
3. The aim of objective inquiry is to decrease objective uncertainty.
4. Hence, objective inquiry and authentic Christian faith are incommensurable.

To properly treat the first premise, authentic Christian faith should be distinguished from its lesser forms. Climacus laments that most Europeans assume Christianity “as given” (50). He calls this ‘faith taken in vain,’ since such self-identified Christians only assume the Christian title because all of their friends are alleged Christians or because they are citizens of a purportedly Christian nation (31). To be sure, this brand of Christianity, a product of mere association, falls far short of authentic faith. Those who only emptily call themselves Christian—perhaps because of societal norms—lack inwardness and passion. They do not make any great sacrifice for faith, nor are they willing to compromise their comfortable lifestyle in any way that society does not demand. Their faith is limited by indifference, and their lukewarm form of Christianity lacks the power to move mountains or to make these Christians into apostles.

Climacus thinks authentic Christian faith requires “infinite, personal, impassioned interestedness” (29). Whereas vain believers are crippled by a lack of passion, authentic believers have sufficient passion to commit themselves to the pursuit of an eternal happiness. He argues that this pursuit requires immense passion precisely because it is a paradox to most people (205). The more passion believers have, the greater will be
their faith and their propensity to imitate Christ and pursue his happiness. That is, as stated in the first premise of the passion-venture argument, passion breeds authentic Christian faith.

Having established that passion is prerequisite for authentic faith, we now ask how prospective Christians can acquire sufficient passion. Climacus insists that people cannot develop adequate passion through study. He believes that faith can never be the result of “straightforward scholarly deliberation” or any other direct means (29). On the contrary, Climacus asserts, “Christianity is spirit; spirit is inwardness; inwardness is subjectivity; subjectivity is essentially passion, and at its maximum an infinite, personally interested passion for one’s eternal happiness” (33). This formula highlights the role of subjectivity in developing proper passion.

But why does he think passion must be grounded in subjectivity? Climacus says it is because “all essential decision is rooted in subjectivity” (33). For Climacus, the essential decision refers to ethico-religious truth that leads to salvation. He believes that would-be Christians must follow the essential truth at every turn. This pursuit requires something greater than the axioms and rules of calculation which govern worldly decision. Because essential decision is rooted in subjectivity, the faithful need personal experience and an individual God-relationship in order to continue toward their celestial goal. The passion which flows from such subjectivity motivates Christians toward salvation when objectivity fails. Climacus is not arguing that subjectivity saves men and women. Nevertheless, he contends that “an eternal happiness is a question only for the impassioned, infinitely interested subjectivity” (32). That is, while subjectivity is not sufficient for salvation, Climacus deems it necessary.

Objectivity is the antithesis of subjectivity. Rather than draw strength in its believers-specific significance, objective inquiry requires external validity through experiments and proofs. The final premise in the passion-venture argument reminds us that the mission of objective inquiry is to remove all uncertainty and leave the investigator with a system of truths that can be universally confirmed. If people are interested in applying objective inquiry to their faith, they must first forget what they know through subjectivity and then seek to reestablish the truth of their beliefs through replicable proofs and external experimentation.
Climacus concludes that this is exactly the problem: objective inquiry and authentic Christian faith are incommensurable because the former seeks to eliminate the objective uncertainty that is necessary for the latter. Applying objective inquiry deprives faith of its passion and sets faith equal to a mathematical equation or any other objective statement that speaks nothing to the essential decision of salvation. Climacus considers believers who try to eliminate all uncertainty from their system of beliefs to be sadly comic (211).

But can a limited amount of objective inquiry at least provide a foundation for faith? Climacus does not think so. He says that as soon as matters of faith are treated objectively, they lose passion and infinite interest (31). Climacus further argues, “The more objective the observer becomes, the less he builds an eternal happiness, that is, his eternal happiness, on his relation to his observation, because an eternal happiness is a question only for the impassioned, infinitely interested subjectivity” (32). In sum, the passion-venture argument says that objective inquiry dooms authentic Christian faith because it chases out the uncertainty necessary for faith-building passion.

This argument is very compelling. As a Christian missionary I was charged to relay to strangers the doctrines I hold as truths. The missionary program, as modeled after scripture, emphasizes objective uncertainty. Various passages that shape the missionary teaching method promise that the Holy Ghost will reveal the truth of all things to every diligent seeker (Moroni 10:5 and John 14:26). Far from an objective inquiry, which aims to eliminate all subjectivity, we invited those who would hear us to engage in a profoundly subjective inquiry— a process that required them to evaluate our message personally and then to pray to God to know its truthfulness. We later returned to ask our pupils what responses they received. Those who plunged into the subjective, reading scripture and praying daily, bridled their objective uncertainty in a way that fostered faith-building passion. They exhibited authentic Christian faith in their actions and continue to manifest their commitment to Christianity. Contrastingly, others we visited were obsessed with the objective uncertainties before them. They engaged us in long discussions in order to increase their objective certainty. Climacus would call this exercise futile because he says that there is no objective truth in Christianity (224). I also found that trying to transfer my understanding of a doctrine to these people never generated any passion in
them. Passion comes from within and cannot be inserted into another’s life. The dispassionate people I met refused to embrace objective uncertainty; as a result, they did not reach authentic Christian faith.

A clever opponent of this argument might counter that removing some of the objective uncertainty surrounding Christianity would make it an easier sell. Imagine that we could confirm every word of the gospels, pinpoint the locations of every scene hallmark to Christianity, trace the succession of Christ’s power from His day until ours, and so forth. Would such certainty cultivate greater faith? It does not seem likely. If this increased objective certainty made any contribution to Christianity, it would only add to the throngs of vain believers. Climacus seems to agree. He argues that “it becomes more difficult year by year” to become a Christian because it has now “become so easy” (215). Nevertheless, a full comprehension of the dialogue does not guarantee its truthfulness. That is, even if we could confirm all of the objective truths that frame Christianity, the source of faith would still be the remaining objective uncertainty. People would not derive faith from these objective truths, but from their subjective understanding of the incarnation, sacrifice, and mercy of God—those things which can never be established objectively.

We now move to a second argument against an objective route to faith. Bearing significant resemblance to the passion-venture argument, the inspiration argument also reveals a conflict between that which can be known objectively, historicity, and that which can only be known subjectively, inspiration. The argument is as follows:

1. Authentic Christian faith requires acceptance of the inspiration of the scriptures.

2. Inspiration cannot be determined by objective historical inquiry.

3. Hence authentic Christian faith cannot be based upon objective historical inquiry.

Christianity does not make sense to rational people, because it has at its core the paradox that God entered time and became a mortal (217). By our understanding, this is absurd, but this paradox is laid out in the scriptures. The same scriptures also provide us the words of God and several
models for how to live as Christians. Without these inspired aids, people would be left to their own devices. Thankfully though, this is not the case. God prepared a way to knowledge through the scriptures. By studying the inspired words of God, readers can begin to form an understanding of the Christian paradox and their relationship to God. Inspired scriptures are necessary then to inform and direct authentic Christian faith. They provide a foundation on which Christians can build their eternal happiness.

The second premise in the inspiration argument calls into question the scope of historical inquiry. Climacus says that historical inquiry naturally turns to the holy scriptures to determine what Christianity is and is not (23). To secure this inquiry, it becomes necessary to ensure that the holy scriptures, understood in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript as the Bible alone, are indeed inspired. What a daunting task for historical inquiry: to prove the divinity of some sixty-six volumes! Many would use critical theology to establish the Bible’s inspiration, but Climacus worries about this method. He likens critical theology to a philologist that dedicates his life to the publication of a book by Cicero. If the man were to exercise every academic caution and employ all of the most advanced techniques in hermeneutics, the book would be true to the original author, but it would contribute nothing to the eternal happiness of mankind (25–26).

Climacus worries that critical theology similarly assumes too much—that sufficiently trained scholars can produce a document upon which all people should attempt to build their eternal happiness. He points to Luther’s rejection of the Epistle of James as one of many contradictions that should discourage us from adopting any particular scholar’s conclusions about the inspiration of the scriptures.

Since scholars often disagree about which portions of the Bible are inspired, Climacus suggests that we imagine that “there has been a successful demonstration of whatever any theological scholar in his happiest moment could ever have wished to demonstrate about the Bible” (28). This imagined study concludes that every letter of every word in all of the books is inspired and that there are no contradictions anywhere in the collection. He asks if this finding would bring the nonbeliever any closer to authentic Christian faith. Climacus determines that it would not. Nor would such a confirmation increase the faith of the believer (29). In an additional thought experiment he asks us to imagine that the Bible is completely
defrauded. He concludes again that neither the believer nor the nonbeliever would be affected (30).

Through his discussion of the philologist and the two thought experiments regarding the Bible, Climacus establishes that objective historical inquiry cannot judge the inspiration of the scriptures. Studies of religious texts that purport to determine inspiration really only gauge historical accuracy and consistency with other records because there is no external measure of divinity. Objective historical inquiry might reduce texts to comparable components, but this is not yet helpful. Similar to Climacus, we can suppose that after dissecting the Book of Mormon we find that it has many similarities to the Bible, that records from the same period tell the same stories, and that all historic references are accurate. What does this tell us about the inspiration of Mormonism? Such a study establishes historical consistency, but it falls short of inspiration. Similarities do not necessarily derive from the same source, and historical consistency does not discount coincidence. Like Climacus, we find this experiment ineffective because historical objectivity is insufficient for inspiration.

We conclude with Climacus that authentic Christian faith cannot be based upon objective historical inquiry, because the process cannot confirm the inspiration of the holy scriptures. It seems that at the most basic level, historical inquiry lacks the tools necessary to determine divinity. At best, such inquiry only produces approximation, a weak foundation for an eternal happiness (30). Scholarly attempts to correct biblical history or to retranslate and reorganize biblical texts tend to be very bold in contradicting one another and arrogant in declaring their revised versions to be the proper document on which one is to build an eternal happiness. Such squabbling demonstrates why there can be no confidence in objective historical inquiry. If believers base their faith on objectivity, they will miss the inspiration of the scriptures and will therefore forfeit any understanding of Christianity and its paradox, which Climacus believes can only come from the holy scriptures.

Climacus makes a strong argument that objective historical inquiry can never make absolute determinations about inspiration. Given the frequent contradiction in historical inquiry, it seems the method often arrives only at best guesses. Like Climacus, certainly we would find it reckless to build our eternal happiness on approximations. The essential decision must be more subjective (32). The two hypothetical scenarios that he drew during
his discussion of scripture embrace this subjectivity. The moral is that our acceptance or rejection of scripture is independent of objective certainty. To be sure, it is convenient when historical inquiry confirms religious belief. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints love to find chiasmus in the Book of Mormon and artifacts of ancient civilizations in Central America. Even still, Latter-day Saints tend not to worry when scholars call Book of Mormon geography into doubt or when scientists question the lineage of Native Americans. Faith in scripture persists despite objectivity because faith is inward and passionate. This idea is consistent with Climacus, who said, “Objectively there is no truth; an objective knowledge about the truth or the truths of Christianity is precisely untruth” (224).

Critics might contend that the first premise of the inspiration argument is simply not true. They could reason that an omnipotent God does not need written scripture to instruct His children: He could teach people individually instead. Such an argument would raise issues about the character and workings of God, two issues that would open lengthy lines of debate. Instead of challenging these theological points, we should permit that God may not need a written canon to relay His will. We can still show that this criticism of the first premise fails to discredit the inspiration argument because we can easily extend the umbrella of scripture to include personal revelation. This adjustment seems consistent with Doctrine and Covenants 68:4, which says, “Whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Spirit shall be scripture.” When we allow personal and continuing revelation from God to contribute to holy scripture, we actually strengthen the inspiration argument because there is no conceivable way to establish the authenticity of personal revelation through an objective historical inquiry. How can one objectively examine personal experience with God? The conclusion is the same: authentic Christian faith cannot be based upon objective historical inquiry.

In his development and employment of the passion-venture and inspiration arguments, Climacus logically demonstrates that objectivity is not only irrelevant, but an actual barrier to true Christianity. If people are to truly seek after Jesus Christ and pursue His eternal happiness, they must first learn to love subjectivity—to reach out for that which they can only know on a personal level. Personal revelation must overrule external validity. Only through such subjectivity can believers have authentic faith and only through this quality of faith in Christ can they be saved. Perhaps the
most valuable lesson from this first portion of the Postscript is that one cannot become a Christian through a route that the world finds attractive. Just the opposite, to become a Christian is to dedicate oneself absolutely to the subjective truths that the world naively calls madness.
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 ordinarily empirical proposition.

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

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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 the 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 the 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 the 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 the 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 the 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 the 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 the SH may be, it is more reasonable to maintain that we do in fact know many things; thus, the 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” (G.E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers*). 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 the SH and (4), Moore is content with rejecting the SH in favor of (4) because it has persuasive, intuitive plausibility.

However, this solution is not very satisfying for several reasons. In On Certainty,\(^1\) 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’” (Wittgenstein 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 the SH. 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
(1) & \text{ A knows that P} \\
(2) & \text{ A knows that P entails Q} \\
(3) & \text{ A knows that Q}
\end{align*}
\]

As regards the 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.

\(^1\) This book will be cited by the author’s last name followed by the page number.
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 the 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 the 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, the SH seems sound. However, the 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 p.m. 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. Coincidently, the coroner had concluded that Smith’s enemy was murdered at 4:30 p.m.

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 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 the SH, contextualism maintains that skeptical alternatives are not always epistemically relevant with respect to all S-knows-that-O claims. Only if the 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 sceptical argument. Thus, once the 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 the 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 the 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 the 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 the 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. The SH is com-
patible with claims of ordinary knowledge because they do not logically contradict. A contradiction presupposes that the meaning of the word is invariant, but contradictions\(^2\) 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 the 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 the 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 the SH is in play.

There is a persistent concern that in conceding the 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.\(^3\) 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 that one should instead adopt more traditional and less restrictive standards? After all, it very well could have been the case that our language developed in such a way that the word ‘tall’ denoted the concept of “over

\(^2\) Here I am referring to alleged, as opposed to genuine, contradictions.

\(^3\) I have taken this objection and adapted it from DeRose’s. “Solving the Skeptical Problem.”
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, rather than 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 that 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 the SH is in play. However, if the context is such that the SH is in play, then the SH necessarily prevents one from knowing not-D. The contextualist seems to be caught in a contradiction. On one hand, she maintains that when the 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 the 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 the 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 the 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. 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 possible existence of fake barns. Thus, contextualism seems to entail a peculiar position where Henry knows that the barns are real even though

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4 This example was used by Alan Goldman in “What is Justified Belief.”
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 p.m. 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” (Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons). 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.
Works Cited
