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## CONTEXTUALISM, SCEPTICISM, AND THE PROBLEM OF EPISTEMIC DESCENT

ABSTRACT. Perhaps the most dominant anti-sceptical proposal in the recent literature—advanced by such figures as Stewart Cohen, Keith DeRose and David Lewis—is the *contextualist* response to radical scepticism. Central to the contextualist thesis is the claim that, unlike other non-contextualist anti-sceptical theories, contextualism offers a dissolution of the sceptical paradox that respects our common sense epistemological intuitions. Taking DeRose's view as representative of the contextualist position, it is argued that instead of offering us an intuitive response to scepticism, contextualism is actually committed to a revisionist stance as regards our everyday usage of epistemic terms. In particular, it is argued that the thesis fails to present a satisfactory explication of a notion—that of 'epistemic descent'—that is pivotal to the anti-sceptical import of the account. On the positive side, however, it is claimed that although the contextualist response to scepticism is ultimately unsatisfying, DeRose's theory does contain within it the framework for a completely different—and far more persuasive—account of the 'phenomenology' of scepticism which runs along non-contextualist lines.

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“*He that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow.*”  
Ecclesiastes, 1:18.

## I

Following Keith DeRose (1995, 1), Ernest Sosa (1999), Jonathan Vogel (1999) *et al*, I shall understand the sceptical paradox (in its most basic guise) to be the supposed joint incompatibility of the following three claims, each of which appears, on the surface of things and taken individually, to be perfectly in order. Take ‘H’ to refer to some carefully chosen sceptical *hypothesis* (such as that one is a brain in a vat (BIV) which is being ‘fed’ its experiences by computers), and ‘O’ to refer to an everyday *ordinary* proposition, one’s knowledge of which is thought to be above question (such as that one has hands) and which entails not-H:<sup>1</sup>

1. I don’t know that not-H.
2. If I don’t know that not-H, then I don’t know that O.
3. I do know that O.

The claim that line 1 makes, that one is unable to come to know the denials of sceptical

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is true that different sceptical hypotheses issue in subtly distinct types of sceptical argument, nothing hangs on such differences here. For example, the BIV hypothesis is consistent with the truth of a wider range of everyday propositions than Descartes’ *malin génie* hypothesis, but the range of propositions is still enough to buttress a radical sceptical argument. One possible exception in this regard could be the sceptical hypothesis that is employed in dreaming scepticism (‘I don’t know that I am not now dreaming’, or some similar formulation). The reason for this is that, unlike most other types of sceptical hypothesis, the dreaming hypothesis *is* consistent with the truth of a broad class of everyday propositions. Although it cannot both be true that I have two hands *and* that I am a BIV, for example, it could be both true that I have two hands and that I am now dreaming. This point is discussed in Wright (1991; cf. Pritchard 2001d) who notes that the force of dreaming scepticism does not lie in the inconsistency of the dreaming hypothesis with the *truth* of everyday propositions but rather with our *knowledge* of these propositions. Wright thus offers a construal of dreaming scepticism that is different, in detail, from the way that radical sceptical arguments are understood here. In order to keep

hypotheses—such as that one is not a BIV—seems entirely intuitive. Precisely why it should seem so intuitive is an issue that we shall return to below. Line 2—that if one does not know the denial of a sceptical hypothesis (such as that one is not a BIV) then one does not know an everyday proposition which entails the denial of that hypothesis (such as that one has hands)—depends for its intuitiveness upon the highly plausible ‘closure’ principle for knowledge. In its most basic form, this states that if an agent knows a proposition,  $\phi$ , and knows that this proposition entails a second proposition,  $\psi$ , then that agent must also know  $\psi$ .<sup>2</sup> Granted this principle, if one lacks knowledge of the consequent proposition, but knows that the antecedent proposition entails the consequent proposition, then one must lack knowledge of the antecedent proposition also. Accordingly, since we can legitimately take it for granted that most agents know the trivial conceptual truth that O entails not-H, it follows that a lack of knowledge that not-H results in a lack of knowledge that O, just as line 2 contends.<sup>3</sup> Finally, given the truth of lines 1 and 2, it follows that one will lack knowledge of O—indeed, ultimately, the whole class of everyday propositions which could instantiate O—and yet, as stated in line 3, it seems wholly implausible that one should lack knowledge of so basic a proposition. In short, line 3 states, in effect, that radical scepticism must be false.

We have, then, three claim which, taken independently, are wholly intuitive and compelling but which, taken collectively, generate a contradiction. It would seem, therefore, that we have a paradox on our hands and, given that this is a paradox, it follows that something has to give somewhere; one cannot retain one’s commitment to all of these propositions in their current form, at

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matters as straightforward as possible, however, I shall side-step this complication and simply take the BIV hypothesis as the paradigm sceptical hypothesis.

<sup>2</sup> To make this principle more precise it would be necessary to add (at the very least) that the knowledge that is at issue is relativised throughout to a particular time, and to stipulate that the agent does indeed have the required belief in the consequent proposition. Though imprecise, such a formulation should suffice for our purposes here.

<sup>3</sup> There has been some discussion in the recent literature—most notably by Brueckner (1994b) and Cohen (1998b)—regarding the possibility that what actually underlies the sceptic’s use of line 2 is not closure but rather a more fundamental epistemic principle termed the ‘underdetermination’ principle. I ignore this issue here, however, because even those, such as Brueckner, who argue that it is underdetermination that is in play are nevertheless willing to allow that the two principles are logically equivalent. Nothing should be lost, therefore, by focusing on the closure-based conception of the sceptical argument which is, in any case, the dominant interpretation of the sceptical argument in the contemporary literature. For a more in-depth discussion of the role of closure in radical sceptical arguments, see Pritchard (2001a; 2001e).

least not without some account of why, appearances notwithstanding, they do not actually conflict after all.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the sceptic will be intent on denying line 3 and so affirming scepticism, the anti-sceptics tend to divide into two main camps. Either, *à la Moorean* anti-scepticism,<sup>5</sup> they deny line 1; or, *à la Nozickean* anti-scepticism,<sup>6</sup> they deny the closure principle as a means of rejecting line 2.

In contrast, the *contextualist* strategy—as advanced by Stewart Cohen (1986, 1988, 1991, 1998a, 1999, 2000a), DeRose (1995), David Lewis (1996) *et al*—claims to offer an anti-sceptical approach that is able to preserve our intuition that each of these three lines is correct, whilst modifying our understanding of them such that they do not issue in a paradox. In essence (we shall consider the details in a moment), the contextualist proposal involves illustrating how the ascription and non-ascription of knowledge in the argument above is in fact made relative to *different* epistemic standards. So whereas it may be true, by the lights of the demanding sceptical standard, to say that I do not know that I am not a BIV, and thus, since I know that having hands entails that I am not a BIV, I do not know that I have hands; the same conclusion need not follow in non-sceptical contexts where a weaker epistemic standard is in play. Accordingly, and *contra* the sceptic, on the contextualist account the sceptical conclusion that we lack knowledge of much of what we believe is consistent with the everyday verdict on our knowledge that we know a great deal. Each of the three claims cited above could thus be true without there being any contradiction.

As a result, contextualism claims to be the only wholly intuitive anti-sceptical (or, for that matter, sceptical) epistemological theory on the market. If this is true, this places contextualism in an advantageous dialectical position since any resolution of a paradox that is able to preserve our intuitions is automatically preferable to a competing non-intuitive resolution. This is especially true

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<sup>4</sup> Put another way, what is paradoxical is what follows from the conjunction of lines 1 and 2, which is the denial of 3. I discuss the supposed ‘paradoxical’ nature of radical sceptical arguments in more depth in Pritchard (2001b).

<sup>5</sup> The reference to G. E. Moore comes from his notorious ‘proof’ of the existence of an external world, where he held up his hands in support of his knowledge that he has two hands, and then straightforwardly inferred knowledge of the existence of an external world. See Moore (1925; 1939). I do not mean to claim here that Moore would undertake the same strategy as regards sceptical hypotheses (such as the BIV hypothesis), only that it is in the spirit of the Moorean response to external world scepticism to argue in this way.

<sup>6</sup> Although it is Nozick (1981) who typically gets the credit for being the first to deny the closure principle in this way, the basic motivation for this type of strategy can found in two earlier papers by Dretske (1970; 1971).

as regards scepticism. If the only way to meet scepticism would be to revise one's intuitive construal of one's epistemic concepts, then it would appear that the sceptical challenge re-emerges at second-order since the question would then be what it is that legitimates this revision of one's concepts over the simple acceptance of the intuitive sceptical reading.<sup>7</sup>

## II

Of the numerous contextualist theories currently being advanced in the literature, the most developed, and influential, version is that presented by DeRose (1995). What makes this theory so interesting is that it both draws upon an earlier presentation of a contextualist thesis by Lewis (1979) and utilises aspects of two prominent non-contextualist accounts due to Robert Nozick (1981) and Fred Dretske (1970; 1971). In what follows, we shall thus focus on the DeRose version of contextualism. However, similar remarks will also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other contextualist accounts that run along the same general line.<sup>8</sup>

For DeRose, the basic contextualist strategy pivots upon the acceptability, and appropriate use, of the following contextualist thesis:

Suppose a speaker A (for "attributor") says, "S knows that P", of a subject S's true belief that P. According to contextualist theories of knowledge attributions, how strong an epistemic position S must be in with respect to P for A's assertion to be true can vary according to features of A's conversational context. (DeRose 1995, 4)

DeRose employs this thesis as a means of explaining the following supposed features of the 'phenomenology' of scepticism. First, that ascriptions of knowledge to subjects in conversational

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this point, see Pritchard (2001b).

<sup>8</sup> In particular, this line of criticism should apply (suitably modified of course) to the contextualist account offered by Lewis (1996) and possibly also that put forward Cohen (1986; 1988; 1991; 1998a; 1999, 2000a), though the issue as regards Cohen's view is complicated somewhat by some of the ways in which in recent work he has distanced his view from the general DeRose-Lewis line (see especially Cohen 1999). For some of the main discussions of the general Cohen-DeRose-Lewis variety of contextualism, see Schiffer (1996); Feldman (1999), Heller (1999a; 1999b); Vogel (1999); Fogelin (2000); Sosa (2000); and Williams (2000).

It should also be noted that although this variety of contextualism is by far the dominant contextualist thesis in the contemporary literature, it is not the only one. In particular, two different types of contextualist account that have been offered and which have also been influential are the more general contextualist thesis proposed by Annis (1978) and the explicitly Wittgensteinian contextualist account advanced by Williams (1991). For a recent survey of different types of

contexts in which sceptical error-possibilities have been raised seems wholly wrong. Second, that in conversational contexts in which no sceptical error-possibilities are in play, it seems perfectly appropriate to ascribe knowledge to subjects. And, third, that all that may change when one moves from a non-sceptical conversational context to a sceptical context are mere conversational factors. Intuitively, these three ‘intuitions’ are in conflict because, or so the standard non-contextualist thought runs, *one* of these judgements must be wrong. That is, since conversational context has no obvious bearing on the epistemic status of a subject’s beliefs, hence it ought to be universally true (i.e., *whatever* the conversational context) that the subject either does or does not know the propositions in question. Contextualism opposes this thought with the suggestion that what is actually occurring is not a contradiction but a responsiveness, on the part of the attributor of knowledge, to a fluctuation in the epistemic standards (and with them the subject’s possession of knowledge) caused by a change in the conversational context. Simply opposing this thought is not enough, though, what is also required is a motivation for this new construal.

As regards motivating an explanation of the first element of the ‘phenomenology’ of scepticism, it will not do, as DeRose notes, to simply resort to the kind of relevant alternatives (RA) model of knowledge advanced by Dretske whereby knowledge that P requires the elimination of all *relevant* alternatives (but not thereby *all* alternatives) to P.<sup>9</sup> Take an ‘alternative’ to P to be any proposition which is inconsistent with the truth of P. The RA thought is that the class of alternatives to P that need to be ruled out in order for an agent to know P (the class of *relevant* alternatives) can vary from context to context. So although it may be true that in an everyday context I do not need to rule out the possibility that I may be a BIV in order to know that I have hands (because such a possibility is irrelevant), in a context in which BIV-hypotheses *are* relevant (where, for instance,

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epistemological contextualism, see Norman (1999). I critically discuss the relationship between the Cohen-DeRose-Lewis version of contextualism and the Williams account in Pritchard (2001f).

<sup>9</sup> The *loci classici* for the RA approach are Dretske (1970; 1971; 1981). It ought to be noted, however, that although the RA theory lends itself to a contextualist construal—see, for example, Stine (1976) and Cohen (1991)—Dretske himself has been explicit in his rejection of this interpretation. See Dretske (1991). For DeRose’s account of the RA approach, see DeRose (1995, 193-7) and also the exchange between DeRose (1992; 1996) and Brueckner (1994).

someone has explicitly raised the possibility that I might be a BIV), knowing that I have hands may indeed require me to exclude the possibility that I am a BIV. On this construal of the RA model of knowledge we thus have a proto-contextualist theory whereby epistemic standards (embodied in the standard of relevance) shift from one context to another. The problem with this line of thought, however, is that although it might account for the supposed sceptical phenomenology in question, it does not explain it. That is, it does not explain what, exactly, is *relevant* about the raised sceptical possibility—especially since this possibility is manifestly *irrelevant* (at least by the lights of this account) in every other context. As a result, the RA approach is unable to explain the first element of the ‘phenomenology’ of scepticism identified above.

In order to meet this requirement, DeRose turns to Nozick’s (1981) modal account of knowledge. Nozick’s analysis of the sceptical predicament explains the fact that I am unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses (that, for instance, I am not a BIV) in terms of the *counterfactual insensitivity* of the beliefs involved. DeRose elucidates this notion of counterfactual insensitivity in the following terms:

[...] the problem with my belief that I am not a BIV is that I would have this belief [...] even if it were false (even if I were one). It is this that makes it hard to claim to *know* that I’m not a BIV. For [...] we have a very strong general, though not exceptionless, inclination to think that we don’t know that P when we think that our belief that P is a belief that we would hold even if P were false. Let’s say that S’s belief that P is *insensitive* if S would believe P even if P were false. [...] We tend to judge that S doesn’t know that P when we think S’s belief that P is insensitive. (DeRose 1995, 18)

In contrast, an agent’s belief in an everyday proposition, such as that she has two hands, *is* sensitive, since in the nearest possible worlds in which this proposition is false (where, to offer a gruesome example, she has just stumbled from the wreckage of a car accident to discover two stumps at the ends of her arms), she doesn’t believe it.

However, although this notion of counterfactual sensitivity may explain our intuition that one can both know many everyday propositions whilst nevertheless remaining ignorant of the denials of sceptical hypotheses, it is of no obvious use to a contextualist like DeRose. This is because accepting counterfactual sensitivity (so described) involves committing oneself to denying the closure principle

(and with it, to line 2 of the paradox presented above), an anti-sceptical strategy distinct from contextualism. As we just saw, if counterfactual sensitivity is a necessary condition of knowledge, then it follows that one can know that one has two hands whilst simultaneously *failing* to know that one is not a BIV, regardless of whether one knows that having hands entails that one is not a BIV. So if DeRose is to accept line 2 of the paradox, then he is going to have to find some construal of counterfactual sensitivity that does not entail the denial of closure.<sup>10</sup> And this is not the only reason why DeRose's acceptance of counterfactual sensitivity must be limited. After all, doesn't this notion of sensitivity show us that we *never* know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, in *any* conversational context?

Given such considerations it is perhaps unsurprising that DeRose does indeed make the acceptance of the closure principle a pivotal part of his argument for contextualism. He focuses on the acceptability of line 2 in this respect, pointing out that one's epistemic position as regards the ordinary proposition, O, can be no better than one's epistemic position *vis-à-vis* the denial of the sceptical hypothesis, not-H. Accordingly, it is a rather strange state of affairs to argue, with those who deny closure, that one can simultaneously know the former whilst lacking knowledge of the latter. As DeRose (1995, 32) rather neatly expresses the matter, this sort of reasoning goes against the "intuitively compelling realisation that it would be no wiser to bet one's immortal soul on O's being true than to bet it on not-H's being true."

But how are we to understand "epistemic position" here if it is not to be expressed in terms of counterfactual sensitivity? The distinction runs as follows. Recall that counterfactual sensitivity requires the agent to lack the belief that P in the nearest possible worlds in which P is false, no matter how 'far-out', modally speaking, these worlds are. Hence, counterfactual sensitivity to an everyday

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<sup>10</sup> Or, at least, he is going to have to find some construal of counterfactual sensitivity that is sufficient to support some *restricted* version of the closure principle that is able to support line 2. After all, it is not inconsistent with contextualism *per se* that the universal validity of closure be denied since one could accept line 2 on a principled basis without thereby endorsing an unrestricted version of the closure principle. That said, however, very few contextualists actually make this distinction, perhaps the only exception being Heller (1999a) who both denies scepticism on contextualist grounds *and* offers independent reasons for thinking that although closure holds in the sceptical context, it nevertheless fails in other

proposition such as O will (one would hope at any rate) only require the agent to consider very nearby possible worlds, unlike counterfactual sensitivity to the BIV hypothesis, which would require the agent to consider far-off BIV-worlds. In contrast, epistemic position is described by DeRose as follows:

[...] being in a strong epistemic position with respect to P is to have a belief as to whether P is true match the fact of the matter as to whether P is true, not only in the actual world, but also at the worlds sufficiently close to the actual world. That is, one's belief should not only be true, but also should be non-accidentally true, where this requires one's belief as to whether P is true to match the fact of the matter at nearby worlds. The further away one gets from the actual world, while still having it be the case that one's belief matches the fact at worlds that far away and closer, the stronger a position one is in with respect to P. (DeRose 1995, 34)

Unlike counterfactual sensitivity, then, which is entirely dependent upon one's ability to track the truth in the nearest *not-P* worlds (no matter how far out they may be), epistemic position is simply a matter of tracking the truth *simpliciter*. Accordingly, one can be in a strong epistemic position with respect to one's belief that one is not a BIV even though that belief is never sensitive in the required manner. The out-right denial that an agent can know not-H on grounds of counterfactual sensitivity (made by both the sceptic and the Nozickean) thus fails to acknowledge this fact.

We are now a little nearer to understanding DeRose's initial formulation of the contextualist position in terms of the variability of "how strong an epistemic position S must be in with respect to P for A's assertion [*that S knows P*] to be true". Although counterfactual sensitivity may be important for knowledge possession, it is not necessary because sometimes strength of epistemic position will be enough. DeRose characterises the mechanism that brings about a shift in epistemic standards as follows:

When it is asserted that some subject S knows (or does not know) some proposition P, the standards for knowledge (the standards for how good an epistemic position one must be in to count as knowing) tend to be raised, if need be, to such a level as to require S's belief in that particular P to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge. (DeRose 1995, 36)

The contextualist thought is thus that the possession of knowledge only requires that one's beliefs be counterfactually sensitive when the propositions believed explicitly feature within that conversational

context. When the propositions believed are not explicit in that context, then strength of epistemic position can suffice where this is characterised in terms of the most demanding proposition raised in that context (i.e., the proposition which, in order for one's beliefs to be counterfactually sensitive to it, requires one to consider the furthest possible worlds). If one's epistemic position as regards one's belief in the non-explicit proposition is such that it matches the truth as to whether this proposition is true in the range of possible worlds demanded by counterfactual sensitivity to that context's explicit propositions, then that proposition will be known even if one's belief in that proposition is not itself counterfactually sensitive.

What motivates this claim is the fact that, as Lewis (1979) famously argued, when it comes to 'context-sensitive' terms like 'flat' or 'knowledge', the conversational 'score' tends to change depending upon the assertions of that context.<sup>11</sup> We may all agree that the table in front of us is 'flat' in an everyday context, but, *ceteris paribus*, if someone enters the room and denies that it is flat we do not thereby disagree with him. Instead, we take it that he means 'flat' in some more demanding sense and so raise the standards for 'flatness' so as to make his assertion true (this is what Lewis calls a "rule of accommodation"). That is, we take it that the new participant of our conversational context means flat in some more restricted sense so that the barely perceptible bumps on the table before us are sufficient to make the claim "This table is flat" false. DeRose considers the Lewis line to have captured something intuitive about the pragmatics of how we use our 'context-sensitive' terms and, moreover, believes that epistemic terms such as 'knowledge' behave in a similar way.

An example will help clarify matters here. Imagine an agent in a quotidian conversational context in which only everyday propositions, such as whether or not one has hands, are at issue.<sup>12</sup>

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Pritchard (2000a).

<sup>11</sup> Lewis (1996) develops this earlier proposal along similar lines to that put forward by DeRose. In some of his earlier work, Unger (1971; 1975) famously advances a related account of how 'knowledge' is an absolute term, though he puts this observation to sceptical, rather than anti-sceptical, use. In more recent writings—especially Unger (1984; 1986)—a more contextualist stance emerges, though he still regards the anti-sceptical import of this position as being ambiguous. For discussion of Unger's view in this regard, see Craig (1990, chapter X and appendix) and Pritchard (2000b).

<sup>12</sup> Contrary to the contextualist line in this respect, it is plausible to think that any context which brought so obvious a proposition as 'I have hands' into question would almost certainly not be quotidian. As Wittgenstein (1969) famously argued, these "hinge" propositions are not, at least in normal circumstances, up for coherent doubt because they perform a

Counterfactual sensitivity to these everyday propositions will only require the consideration of nearby possible worlds and thus the strength of epistemic position demanded will be very weak. Accordingly, since knowing that one has two hands entails that being a BIV is a far-fetched possibility, hence one will be in an epistemic position sufficient for knowing that one is not a BIV even though one's belief that one is not a BIV is counterfactually insensitive.

But suppose now that the sceptical possibility that one might be a BIV is raised. This proposition will then be relevant in that conversational context and thus the strength of epistemic position demanded in that context will rise accordingly. In order to have knowledge within that context one's belief that one is not a BIV must now exhibit counterfactual sensitivity, and the possible worlds relevant to the determination of that counterfactual sensitivity will be relevant to the agent's knowledge of even everyday propositions. Accordingly, one will now lack knowledge both of the denial of the sceptical hypothesis (because one's beliefs in this respect are not counterfactually sensitive), *and* of the everyday propositions (since even though one's beliefs in these propositions are counterfactually sensitive, one can never be in an epistemic position that would support knowledge of them which would be strong enough to track the truth in far-off BIV worlds).

Knowledge is thus secure in everyday conversational contexts, whilst practically non-existent in sceptical conversational contexts, and hence contextualism claims to have solved the paradox presented above in a way that preserves both the phenomenology of scepticism and the intuitiveness of each of the three claims involved.<sup>13</sup>

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role akin to a "framework" assumption around which everyday inquiry functions (e.g. §§341-3). Accordingly, doubt of them would either indicate an abnormal context (one in which we could not take this proposition for granted), or a context in which, either directly or indirectly, a sceptical hypothesis was at issue. For the sake of brevity, however, I shall let this complicating factor pass. For discussion of the Wittgensteinian account of hinge propositions and its relationship to the sceptical challenge and the contextualist treatment of it, see Pritchard (2001c).

<sup>13</sup> Of course, although the contextualist has not directly denied any of the three claims that make up the paradox above, they have denied a fourth claim which was implicit in the formation of that paradox; *viz.*, that the possession of knowledge does not vary with respect to mere conversational factors. This is to be expected; meeting a paradox involves denying an intuition *somewhere*. Crucial to the contextualist account, however, is the thought that this 'intuition' is entirely philosophical in nature and thus is not reflected in our everyday practices. It is this claim that I shall be challenging below.

## III

A central facet of DeRose's contextualist position is thus an account of the workings of both 'epistemic ascent' and 'epistemic descent'. The former occurs when a change in the conversational context brings about an *elevation* in the epistemic standards; the latter when the conversational context changes such that there is a *drop* in epistemic standards. In terms of the sceptical debate the interesting instances of these mechanisms will be when the epistemic standards are raised to accommodate a sceptical error-possibility and our knowledge is thereby destroyed; and when the epistemic standards lower thereafter so that we are reunited once more with our erstwhile knowledge. It is, of course, essential to the anti-sceptical import of the contextualist account that the sceptical phenomenon of epistemic ascent be matched by an equal and opposing phenomenon of epistemic descent, for otherwise knowledge lost in sceptical contexts would never be regained. Significantly, however, although (as we have just seen) DeRose gives a thorough account of the workings of epistemic ascent, he says very little about epistemic descent, merely noting that:

[...] the fact that the skeptic can install very high standards that we don't live up to has no tendency to show that we don't satisfy more relaxed standards that are in place in more ordinary conversations and debates. (DeRose 1995, 38)

Presumably, then, the contextualist account of epistemic descent that DeRose has in mind is that it simply occurs when the conversation changes back to more everyday concerns and "the conversational air has cleared." (DeRose 1995, 42) Everyday knowledge is defeated by the epistemic ascent to sceptical standards, but is regained once the conversation returns to normal and those standards are dropped. This neat picture of epistemic fluctuation is put under pressure, however, by considering what happens in entirely analogous cases of putative epistemic ascent and descent that do not involve radical scepticism.

Compare, for example, the sceptical case of epistemic ascent with that which occurs in the

following scenario.<sup>14</sup> Keith and Stewart are waiting for a flight from L. A. airport and they want to know whether it has a stopover in Chicago. David overhears their conversation and informs them that he knows that there is a stopover because he has seen the flight itinerary. Now let us grant that in this context the standards are such that David does know that the flight has a stopover in Chicago, and thus that his claim to know this fact is perfectly in order in this context. After all, circumstances are (let us say) normal, and, usually, a careful inspection of the flight itinerary would be taken to be enough to support an agent's knowledge of an aspect of that flight itinerary. Suppose, however, that Stewart then makes the point that the meeting that he and Keith are hoping to make at Chicago airport is extremely important and goes on to raise some concerns about the reliability of the itinerary (it might contain a misprint, have been supplanted by an up-dated version, and so on).<sup>15</sup> Stewart is unable to offer grounds to rule-out these possibilities of error and thus they all agree that they don't really know that the plane will stopover in Chicago after all. Accordingly, Keith and David go off to check the information that Stewart has given them. The introduction of these error-possibilities has therefore raised the epistemic standards to a level that is sufficient to defeat Stewart's erstwhile knowledge. We thus have a non-sceptical scenario in which epistemic ascent has destroyed an agent's knowledge, despite the fact that the agent's epistemic position has remained unchanged.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This example is adapted from one used by Cohen—most recently in Cohen (2000, 95-8)—who offers a similar contextualist view. It would be preferable to use an example employed by DeRose himself, of course, but he rarely considers instances of context-change which do not involve epistemic ascent to a sceptical context.

<sup>15</sup> Note that there is no suggestion here that Stewart possesses any good reasons for thinking that this itinerary should not be trusted, it is simply that the importance of the meeting has made him reconsider the grounds he has for believing that he'll make that Chicago meeting. This point is important because if Stewart did possess such grounds then this would affect the example since it would introduce collateral information. As a result, it would be hard to tell whether the change in the epistemic status of his beliefs was due to a change in context or simply reflected the presence of a defeater. Remember, what we are after here is a case that is analogous to the sceptical scenarios that DeRose considered where the context change is entirely due to *conversational* factors.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen (2000) accepts both that the agent knows about the stopover at low standards and also that he lacks this knowledge at the subsequent high standards that were introduced by his fellow participant. He notes that the agents must be content to concede that they lack knowledge at the higher context because otherwise their subsequent checking of this information would be incoherent (it makes no sense, he argues, to say "Okay, *we know* the plane stops in Chicago, but [...] we need to check it out" (96)). By parity of reasoning, anyone who doubted whether or not David had knowledge at the lower standard would have to explain why, had it not been for the importance of the meeting, Keith and Stewart would have accepted such a claim to know at face-value and not checked it out. Does it make any sense to say of a proposition about which one has an interest in having a true belief that one doesn't know whether it is true but nevertheless one isn't going to check (where the 'checks' in question are simple and obvious)? In any case, these considerations should suffice to motivate the contextualist construal of this example offered here although, as I explain below, there are alternative

The first thing that I want to note about this example is a puzzling feature of it that is often not explicitly commented on by contextualists. This is that Stewart has actually gone from claiming knowledge to claiming a *lack* of knowledge whilst remaining in the same epistemic position. Indeed, this feature of the example is more puzzling still once one reflects that Stewart has no reason for thinking that his epistemic position has changed. Accordingly, accepting the contextualist construal of an example like this one means allowing that, *from the agent's own point of view*, a claim to know can be reversed in response to changes in the conversational context alone. This certainly seems odd because we do not normally so freely reverse our claims to know in this way. Indeed, if a claim to know is so shaky that such incidental events can lead to it being withdrawn, then this would seem to be grounds for thinking that such a claim should not have been made in the first place.

This worry becomes more stated once one considers what will happen once Stewart epistemically descends back into the lower standard of knowledge and becomes reunited with his erstwhile knowledge. Will he now be in a position to say that he did know about the stopover after all? Indeed, since context can change purely in response to conversational factors, Stewart's epistemic position throughout these fluctuations may well remain entirely constant and, furthermore, he could be perfectly aware that it has stayed constant so that, even from his point of view, he is simply altering his verdict as to whether or not he knows this proposition in response to mere conversational factors. I take it that there is a strong intuition at work here that acts against our finding such behaviour coherent. Even if the contextualist story is correct and Stewart does know this proposition once the contextual standard returns to normal, it remains that he certainly cannot properly *claim* such knowledge if, as he freely grants, he was willing to claim that he *lacked* such knowledge in a previous context in which his epistemic position was exactly the same.<sup>17</sup>

We have thus identified two problems with the contextualist construal of a non-sceptical

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explanations available for the instability of the propriety of knowledge claims in this respect that can accommodate these points without recourse to a contextualist epistemology.

<sup>17</sup> Putnam (1998) raises a similar objection against the very different sort of contextualist account offered by Williams (1991).

example of epistemic ascent and subsequent descent. First, that *reversing* one's judgement as to the epistemic status of one's own beliefs in response to a mere conversational factor seems counterintuitive (i.e., going from asserting that one knows to asserting that one does *not* know). Seemingly, if one's claim to know is influenced by these factors then one should not have claimed such knowledge in the first place. Second, and more importantly for our purposes, it appears that once one grants that one does not know a certain proposition then, provided that the only thing that changes in the intervening period is the nature of the conversational context, one cannot, thereafter, properly claim to know that proposition. Both problems put pressure on the contextualist's claim to have intuitively captured the *variability* of our knowledge—that the *possession* of knowledge fluctuates in response to mere conversational factors—by highlighting how the supposition of such variability leads to counterintuitive consequences.

The reason for this unease is due to the fact that making a claim to know carries with it certain *conversational implicatures* that are entirely non-contextualist in spirit. For our purposes, let us take it that a conversational implicature is an inference that one is entitled to make upon hearing an assertion, given that one is allowed to make certain assumptions about the agent making the assertion—that he is, for instance, honest, co-operative and (at least otherwise) rational.<sup>18</sup> *Ceteris paribus*, an agent's claim to know will, for instance, carry the conversational implicature that he can be trusted on this point; that, for example, he has, as far as he knows at least, no substantive reason to doubt that his claim to know is faulty. As Austin puts the point:

When I say, 'I know', I *give* others my word: I *give* others *my authority for saying* that 'S is P'. (Austin 1961, 99, italics in the original)

The problem is, of course, that such an implicature is closely tied-up with a commitment, relevant changes in one's epistemic position aside, to 'sticking-by' that knowledge claim in subsequent conversational contexts, and this goes entirely against the contextualist treatment of knowledge

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<sup>18</sup> The *locus classicus* for this account of conversational implicature is, of course, Grice (1989).

claims.<sup>19</sup> More specifically, reversing a claim to know in the face of mere conversational change counts against the ‘trustworthiness’ of a knowledge claim; whilst claiming knowledge even though such knowledge was explicitly denied in a previous conversational context counts against the ‘credibility’ aspect of a knowledge claim. Accordingly, a claim to know made by a contextualist is in danger of issuing in false conversational implicatures, and therefore of being accused of being improper.

Crucially, however, if such instances of epistemic ascent and descent are questionable here, then they will also be equally problematic in analogous sceptical cases. In the everyday context, the contextualist will (by his lights) both know O and not-H and be prepared to claim knowledge of O when necessary. Once the issue of whether H is raised and the standards are elevated, however, his knowledge of both of these propositions will be lost and he will revise his assessment of the epistemic status of his beliefs accordingly, claiming, if necessary, that he does *not* know the propositions believed. Given the nature of the previous examples, we should be suspicious about this move—*reversing* a claim to know purely on the basis of a change in the conversation seems highly dubious, especially since our protagonist will continue to believe that he *did* know both O and not-H in the previous context and that his epistemic position with respect to these propositions is unchanged.

Once the standards have lowered again, however, DeRose maintains that the epistemic status of our protagonist’s beliefs will return to normal and thus that he will regain his knowledge. This may be so, but this does not seem to affect the fact that this person is unable to properly claim knowledge of O even at this lowered standard. If he has claimed not to know a certain proposition, then it would be improper for him to subsequently claim knowledge if the only factor that has altered in the interim was a change in the conversation. It may be (if the contextualist is right) that he does know, but given

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<sup>19</sup> Unless, that is, the implicatures in question are *cancelled* by an explicit disclaimer of some sort. Note, however, that this move would be a very weak line of defence for the contextualist to take. After all, I take it that it is not meant to be part of the contextualist’s account of our everyday practice of claiming knowledge that we ought to explicitly disclaim

that his knowledge was defeated in the previous context by considerations that still cannot be ruled out now, he is unable to *properly* claim that knowledge. Instead of matters returning to normal once the sceptical context has passed, it seems that after an engagement with the sceptic one is left with merely a mute epistemic defence thereafter.<sup>20</sup>

#### IV

None of this constitutes a decisive objection against contextualism, of course, since there are at least two sorts of response that a contextualist like DeRose could make to an argument of this kind. On the one hand, he could simply accept that it is an unfortunate consequence of his position that one cannot claim knowledge of everyday propositions once one has considered sceptical hypotheses (though one does know them). On the other, he could adopt a revisionist approach towards our standard epistemic practice by maintaining that although we are disinclined to alter our claims to know in response to mere conversational factors, still, we *ought* to.

The problem is, however, that adopting either response will result in a distortion of the

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these sorts of conversational implicatures. Moreover, if it were, then the contextualist would clearly be offering a highly revisionistic thesis and would thereby lose the dialectical advantage we ascribed to the position above.

<sup>20</sup> One internally coherent way out of this difficulty could be to maintain that scepticism *would* have been false had no-one ever mentioned it, but that, now that it has been mentioned, there is no adequate way of dismissing it. This would thus be an example of a ‘one-way’ contextualism that only incorporated an account of epistemic ascent—a view that would be tantamount to scepticism given that such a possibility *has* been raised. A number of philosophers have been attracted by this suggestion—what Elgin (1988) has described as the thought that there is an “epistemic efficacy in stupidity”—including Craig (1990, chapter XII) and Unger (1984; 1986). The difference between a one-way contextualism and a two-way view is, however, startling. Rather than incorporating a response to the sceptic, this line of argument instead merely explains why the sceptic is right whilst appearing to be wrong prior to one’s engagement with scepticism. It is thus a *diagnosis* of the truth of scepticism, not a rejection.

One philosopher who offers a contextualist account which, at least partially, attempts to meet this challenge is Lewis (1996). Although, like DeRose, he also believes that the conversational air can return to normal after a sceptical possibility has been raised, he is troubled by the problem of how it is that persons who are considering sceptical possibilities do seem to know a great deal. He gives the example of two epistemologists walking through the Australian Bush discussing scepticism. ‘Do they know where they are going?’, he asks. His response to this problem is, however, singularly unsatisfying. He argues that we should reject the idea of a unitary knowing subject and instead offer a “compartmentalised” view whereby the subject can both know and not know the same proposition at the same time (565). If anything, this seems to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the contextualist position.

An alternative to the epistemic ascent line taken by most contextualists that might evade this particular objection would be to deny that different contexts can be placed in a hierarchy in this way, and thus maintain that a change in context is neither a case of epistemic ascent *or* descent. Williams (1991) makes just such a claim, arguing that each context is epistemically autonomous. Although this may meet the difficulty raised here, however, it does so at the cost of offering an account of the epistemological landscape which is even more radical than the standard contextualist picture. It may well be that such a relativised account of epistemology would be little better than scepticism itself. I specifically discuss Williams’ proposal in the light of the contextualist view advanced by DeRose *et al* in Pritchard (2001f).

dialectical structure of the debate against DeRose's favour. Recall that contextualism's *raison d'être* was meant to be the fact that it was able to account for the supposed 'phenomenology' of scepticism in a way that no other account could. By departing from the intuitive line in this respect, contextualism loses its main motivation. As a result, it thereby puts itself on a par with other competing anti-sceptical theories that are unable to meet the sceptical paradox without denying important epistemological intuitions.

Moreover, the fact that the contextualist account is now unable to unproblematically dissolve the sceptical threat puts pressure upon its initial contention that the 'phenomenology' of scepticism reflected a contextualist epistemic operator. A direct line of response against the contextualist thesis in this respect is thus to charge it with confusing mere shifts in the propriety conditions of knowledge claims with changes in the truth conditions of what is claimed.<sup>21</sup>

In effect, the contextualist offers the following three-stage anti-sceptical account of how our practice of using epistemic terms varies in response to mere conversational changes. First, that we claim to know many everyday propositions in non-sceptical conversational contexts. Second, that we withdraw our claims to know these propositions in contexts in which sceptical hypotheses are at issue. And, third, that we continue to claim knowledge of everyday propositions once the sceptical conversational context has passed and we are back in a non-sceptical conversational context. If the preceding argument concerning the incoherence of first-person ascriptions of knowledge on the contextualist account is right, however, then we have good reason to doubt this picture of our use of epistemic terms in the light of the sceptical challenge.

The problem lies in the second claim, since there is an equivocation here that the contextualist plays upon. On the contextualist story, what ought to happen in sceptical contexts is that agents not only withdraw their claims to know, but that they should also be willing to claim that they do *not* know. It was this feature of the contextualist account that created the problem, since on the

assumption of a uniform epistemic position across contexts, it seemed improper to, first, *reverse* one's knowledge claim and then, subsequently, *reaffirm* the original knowledge claim. For although one can imagine an equivocation in one's epistemic stance *vis-à-vis* claims to know, it seems highly counterintuitive that one should both assert and deny knowledge of the same proposition whilst consciously remaining in the *same* epistemic position, and this intuition works against the contextualist thesis.

For example, contrast the contextualist account in this respect with a simple non-contextualist picture whereby conditions for proper assertion of knowledge claims, but not conditions for knowledge possession, change in response to mere conversational change. Now reconsider the three-stage contextualist account of our engagement with scepticism that we just considered. When faced with a sceptical error-possibility it is certainly uncontroversially true that we tend to withdraw claims to know, and we shall explore some of the reasons for this below. What is controversial is that we actually *reverse* our claims to know as the contextualist contends. Usually, and this conforms to the non-contextualist picture, this will not happen, and thus we do not get the problem of how knowledge can be reasserted once we return to the everyday context. The only cases in which it does happen are those cases in which one changes one's conception of one's epistemic position—where one thought one knew, but, upon being presented with the sceptical argument, realises that one didn't know after all. Crucially, however, if this were an accurate representation of one's epistemic position, this too would be a case in which knowledge possession (or rather the lack of it) remained constant throughout the change in conversational context. Accordingly, it would offer no respite to the contextualist account, since in this scenario one should continue to claim a lack of knowledge in all subsequent conversational contexts provided that one's epistemic position remains constant.

Thus, the point at which the contextualist account falters—i.e., regarding self-ascriptions of knowledge—provides us with the leverage necessary to motivate an entirely different account of the

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<sup>21</sup> To DeRose's credit, he does offer a limited defence of the contextualist interpretation in this respect. See, especially,

phenomenology of scepticism along non-contextualist lines. This is not to reject DeRose's account out of hand, however, since I believe that we can resurrect the core elements of his thesis in a non-contextualist guise in such a way as to capture this phenomenology more accurately.

Continue to assume an invariantist thesis about knowledge (that the conditions for knowledge possession, unlike the conditions for proper assertion of knowledge claims, are not affected by mere conversational factors). Now consider the following thesis adapted from DeRose, where we retain his notion of counterfactual sensitivity:

- A. *Ceteris paribus*, one cannot properly claim knowledge of a proposition,  $\varphi$ , if one recognises that one's belief in  $\varphi$  is counterfactually insensitive.

This seems an eminently plausible rule. If one lacks a counterfactually sensitive belief in  $\varphi$  then one should not claim to know  $\varphi$  because making a claim to know implies that one can personally vouch for the truth of the proposition known, something which one cannot do if one recognises that in the nearest possible world in which that belief is false, one would still believe it. Indeed, think of a paradigm example of a 'bad' claim to know—one where, for instance, the agent has very weak grounds for believing the (true) proposition in question. In such cases part of the problem will be that there is a very near-by possible world in which that proposition is false and yet the agent continues to believe it. This rule would also explain why a claim to know the denial of a sceptical hypothesis (e.g. that one is not a BIV) seems out of place in every conversational context since these are propositions the truth of which we can never be counterfactually sensitive to.

Now consider this second rule adapted from DeRose's account:

- B. *Ceteris paribus*, one cannot properly claim knowledge of a proposition,  $\varphi$ , if one recognises that this carries the conversational implicature that one is in a position to claim knowledge of a second proposition,  $\psi$ , where one recognises that one's belief in  $\psi$  is counterfactually insensitive.

Insofar as A is a plausible rule, B ought to be equally plausible. After all, if one ought not to claim knowledge in cases where one is aware that one lacks a counterfactually sensitive belief, then neither

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DeRose (1995, 42ff.; 1999). In neither case, however, does he consider the sort of objections raised here.

should one claim knowledge in cases in which one recognises that this assertion will carry the conversational implicature that one is in a position to claim to know a second proposition one's belief in which is counterfactually insensitive. This rule would thus explain why, in sceptical contexts, one cannot properly claim knowledge of everyday propositions since if a sceptical error-possibility is on the table then, *ceteris paribus*, to claim such everyday knowledge would carry the implicature that one is in a position to properly claim knowledge of the denial of that error-possibility, something which, since one lacks a counterfactually sensitive belief in this respect, one cannot do. Moreover, this rule would also be 'contextual' in one sense since the sort of implicatures that are generated by an assertion can change from conversational context to conversational context.

For example, claiming to know that the noise that one just heard is only the sound of the creaking pipes can carry different implicatures depending upon the conversational context. If the claim is made in response to a frightened spouse's query, for example, it may carry the implicature that one knows that there is nothing to worry about. If made in response to an idle question, on the other hand, it may carry no such implicature.

The fact that this rule is 'contextual', however, does not itself mean that it can be put to use by the contextualist. After all, that the propriety conditions for claims to know are contextually variable need be no indication whatsoever that the possession conditions for knowledge are likewise contextually variable. Indeed, since there are only pragmatic features of the context at issue here, the default assumption would naturally be to think that the possession conditions for knowledge will remain constant across conversational contexts. Moreover, under this acontextualist construal of how the propriety of a claim to know can change, we also get a more plausible account of the phenomenology of scepticism.

In ordinary contexts where only everyday propositions that one is counterfactually sensitive to are being considered, one can, *ceteris paribus*, claim knowledge with impunity. After all, in such contexts claiming knowledge of an everyday proposition carries no implicature that one is in a

position to claim knowledge of the denial of a sceptical hypothesis, even though the truth of that claim may well entail that one possesses such anti-sceptical knowledge. Moving into a sceptical context changes the situation, however, because then there is a proposition relevant to that context that one is *not* counterfactually sensitive to. Accordingly, not only can one not claim knowledge of this proposition, neither can one claim knowledge of any everyday proposition either because if one is in a conversational context in which the truth of a sceptical hypothesis is at issue, then the claim to know an everyday proposition will carry the implicature that one is in a position to claim knowledge of the denial of a sceptical hypothesis. As expected, there will be a world of difference between saying, for example, that one knows that one has two hands in a ‘sceptical’ conversational context where this carries the implicature that one knows that one is not a BIV, and saying it in an everyday conversational context where it carries no such implicature.

This picture of the mechanisms that guide the shifting propriety conditions for knowledge claims is also neatly reflected in non-sceptical cases of context-change. Consider again the example of the plane stopover described above. Although the truth of Stewart’s claim to know that the plane will stop over in Chicago entails that the itinerary that he referred to was not inaccurate in any of the relevant respects, in the ‘low’ conversational context described this claim does not carry the implicature that Stewart believes himself to be in a position to claim knowledge of this entailed proposition since such an error possibility is clearly not under consideration in that conversational context. Were such an error possibility to become explicit in that conversational context, however, as it does when David raises the issue, then for Stewart to repeat his claim to know *would* carry the implicature that he is in a position to claim knowledge of this entailed proposition. And since such a claim to know that there is no misprint in the itinerary would be inappropriate (because he lacks a counterfactually sensitive belief in this respect), Stewart can no longer properly claim to know that the plane will stop over in Chicago in this conversational context and so he must withdraw his claim to know.

That one should *withdraw* one's claim to know in such a situation is not, however, the same as *reversing* one's claim to know (i.e., claiming *not* to know), and this is the equivocation that the contextualist plays upon. Typically, one will not reverse one's claim to know in a sceptical context for the simple reason that since only conversational factors are involved, so only the conditions for proper assertion have changed. Accordingly, as far as the agent is concerned, he is simply trying to avoid misleading his audience—he is not endeavouring to accurately report his epistemic position. Moreover, even in those non-standard cases where knowledge claims *are* reversed—where one, for instance, becomes convinced by scepticism and therefore regards the mere raising of a sceptical possibility as highlighting the fact that one did not know in the first place—this will not, as far as the agent is concerned at any rate, indicate a change in his epistemic position, but rather the falsity of his previous reports. Either way, then, changes in the conditions for proper assertion of knowledge claims are not reflecting changes in the conditions for knowledge possession (one either knows or does not know in *both* contexts), and thus we do not have an account of the 'phenomenology' of scepticism which supports a contextualist interpretation.

The attraction of modifying DeRose's view in this way does not end there though, since his notion of epistemic position can also shed light upon our standard use of epistemic terms in different conversational contexts. Why is it that we can recognise that a belief is counterfactually insensitive (and so cannot be claimed to be known) and yet nevertheless still feel that what is believed *is* known? Take the sceptical case. We all recognise that our belief in the denials of sceptical hypotheses are counterfactually insensitive (this is illustrated by our reluctance to claim knowledge of them) and yet we also feel that we must know them. After all, as DeRose points out, we have beliefs in everyday propositions that are counterfactually sensitive (and we claim knowledge of these propositions in quotidian scenarios), and our epistemic position as regards our belief in these propositions is no better than it is regarding our belief in the denials of sceptical hypotheses. If we know the everyday propositions then, it seems, we must know the denials of sceptical hypotheses as well.

The distinction between epistemic position and counterfactual sensitivity can account for this intuition provided it is set within a non-contextualist epistemology. Since we have now severed any direct connection between the propriety of a claim to know and the possession conditions for that knowledge, so it may well be that one can know a proposition (in that conversational context) without being in a position to properly claim knowledge of it (in *all* conversational contexts).<sup>22</sup> That is, one may know a proposition because one is in a sufficient epistemic position, even though one cannot properly claim knowledge of that proposition because one's belief lacks the requisite counterfactual sensitivity. Indeed, there ought to be nothing unusual about this by the lights of the account sketched here. After all, even though one can no longer properly claim knowledge of them, one *does* continue to know everyday propositions when one enters the sceptical conversational context since the only thing that has changed has been the conditions for proper assertion. Likewise, if one does know the everyday propositions then one will also be in an epistemic position strong enough to support knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses as well, even despite an inability to properly claim such knowledge. On the non-contextualist account proposed here, although the conditions for proper assertion are variable, *inter alia*, with respect to counterfactual sensitivity and the implicatures of a certain conversational context, knowledge possession will only be variable with respect to epistemic position, and this *can* be strong enough to support knowledge of propositions where one's beliefs are counterfactually insensitive.

As a result, this account also puts the picture of the sceptical paradox that we began with into a new light, since we now have reason to reject not only contextualism but also its main competing anti-sceptical theory—the Nozickean account which denies the principle of closure (and thus line 2 of the paradox). The considerations garnered here concerning epistemic position count directly against any denial of closure (just as they did when set within DeRose's account), since it will be epistemic

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<sup>22</sup> By way of contrast, on the contextualist account one can know a proposition (in that context) without being able to properly claim knowledge of it (in that context), but only because simply claiming knowledge of it changes the context and thus destroys the knowledge at issue.

position, and not counterfactual sensitivity, which is the prime determinant of knowledge possession. By the lights of this approach, the Nozickean theory makes the mistake of inferring from the fact that one can properly claim knowledge of everyday propositions but not the denials of sceptical hypotheses that one must therefore know the everyday propositions but not the denials of sceptical hypotheses.

Furthermore, although contextualism and the Nozickean strategy are out of the running, the remaining anti-sceptical strategy—that which denies line 1 of the paradox and thus affirms that we *do* know the denials of sceptical hypotheses—gains a new motivation. After all, on this view, that one lacks a counterfactually sensitive belief in the denials of sceptical hypotheses only entails that one cannot properly *claim* knowledge of them—it does not entail that one does not know them. Accordingly, by the lights of this account, the rejection of line 1 of the paradox is far more plausible.

That this is so is obscured by the fact that DeRose equates the denial of this element of the paradox with the *Moorean* approach to scepticism. For although the general strategy of affirming that we do know the denials of sceptical hypotheses gains new impetus, the particular Moorean use of this strategy remains implausible. This is because Moore's anti-scepticism proceeded by *claiming* to know the denial of the relevant sceptical hypothesis (that there was an external world), on the basis of his claim to know an everyday proposition (that he had two hands). As a result, Moore offended against the non-contextualist thesis outlined here because he both claimed knowledge of the denial of a sceptical hypothesis (despite lacking a counterfactually sensitive belief in this regard), *and* claimed knowledge of an everyday proposition in a context in which scepticism was at issue and thereby implied that he was also in a position to claim knowledge of the denial of the relevant sceptical hypothesis.<sup>23</sup> That said, however, this does not count against the *modus operandi* as a whole, since it

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<sup>23</sup> For an influential account of how Moore's 'proof' of an external world offends against the grammar of our epistemic language-games, see Wittgenstein (1969; cf. Pritchard 2001c).

is not essential to this strategy that it should proceed in this Moorean fashion.<sup>24</sup>

## V

Ironically, then, when set within a non-contextualist epistemology, DeRose's general approach offers us a new conception of the epistemological landscape. In particular, it provides succour to an old style of anti-scepticism by highlighting how that account can be reconstrued in a more plausible fashion. So although a contextualist *epistemology* is off the menu, a contextualist account of the shifting propriety conditions for knowledge claims is brought to the fore and, with it, a traditional response to scepticism.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I offer a development of this line of thought—what I call 'neo-Moorean anti-scepticism'—and also consider a related view advanced by Sosa (1999), in Pritchard (2002).

<sup>25</sup> This paper was presented at the Department of Logic and Metaphysics at the University of St. Andrews in the Autumn of 1999 and my thanks go to the audience that day, including Patrick Greenough, Katherine Hawley, Jesper Kallestrup, Patrice Philie, Stuart Shapiro, and Crispin Wright. Thanks also to Edward Craig, Stephen Read, Peter Sullivan, Michael Williams, and two anonymous referees for *Dialectica* who, along with almost all of those just mentioned, read and commented on an earlier version of this paper.

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