

# Neo-Mooreanism, Contextualism, and the Evidential Basis of Scepticism

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Two of the main forms of anti-scepticism in the contemporary literature—namely, neo-Mooreanism and attributer contextualism—share a common claim, which is that we are, *contra* the sceptic, able to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. This paper begins by surveying the relative merits of these views when it comes to dealing with the standard closure-based formulation of the sceptical problem that is focussed on the possession of knowledge. It is argued, however, that it is not enough to simply deal with this version of the sceptical challenge, since there is a more fundamental sceptical problem underlying the standard closure-based sceptical argument that can be expressed in terms of the evidential basis of our beliefs. Whilst it is argued that neo-Mooreanism has a slight edge over attributer contextualism when it comes to dealing with the closure-based formulation of the sceptical problem, it is claimed that this view is in an ever stronger dialectical position when it comes to the more pressing evidential formulation of the sceptical problem. It is shown that this is so even if one adapts the attributer contextualist thesis along the lines suggested by Michael Williams and Ram Neta so that it is explicitly designed to deal with the evidential variant of the sceptical problem.

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## 1. Contemporary Anti-Scepticism—Neo-Mooreanism *versus* Attributer Contextualism

The contemporary literature has tended to focus on a formulation of the sceptical problem that goes something like as follows:

- S1 S is unable to know that he's not, say, a BIV.
- S2 If S doesn't know that he's not a BIV, then he doesn't know that he's currently seated (and much else besides).

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*Hence:*

SC S is unable to know that he's currently seated (and much else besides).<sup>1</sup> Given that the argument is valid, and that the conclusion is extremely counterintuitive (at least if S is me at any rate, currently sat at my computer writing this paper), it follows that one of the premises has to go.

Famously, there are those, such as Fred Dretske (1971) and Robert Nozick (1981), who reject the second premise via a rejection of the so-called 'closure' principle for knowledge. Very roughly, the closure principle states that if one knows one proposition, and knows that it entails a second proposition, then one knows that second proposition. Accordingly, if one knows the 'everyday' proposition that one is, say, currently seated, then since one also knows (we might legitimately suppose) that if one is seated then one is not a BIV (since BIVs don't *sit* anywhere), it follows that one also knows the 'anti-sceptical' proposition that one is not a BIV. Thus, we get the second premise of the sceptical argument above via an application of the closure principle, in that if one is unable to know that one is not a BIV, then it follows from closure (and from the fact that the agent concerned knows the relevant entailment), that one is unable to know one is currently seated, along with any other 'everyday' proposition which is inconsistent (and known to be inconsistent) with the BIV hypothesis.

My interest here, however, is not with those who deny the closure principle, since I have argued against such a view at length elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Instead, my concern is with those anti-sceptical views that argue instead against the first premise of the sceptical argument. There are two such views in the contemporary literature. The first, known as 'neo-Mooreanism', simply denies the first premise and offers both an explanatory story about how it is that we could know the denials of sceptical hypotheses and also a diagnostic story about why we might have been led to believe that we could never know such a thing. This sort of position is associated with the work of Ernest Sosa (e.g., 1999), and I have also defended a version of this thesis (e.g., Pritchard 2002d).

The second position is 'attributer contextualism', as defended by such figures as Keith DeRose (1995), David Lewis (1996), and Stewart Cohen (2000). In essence, this view holds that whether or not an assertion of an 'ascription' sentence which ascribes knowledge to an agent, such as 'S knows that P', is true depends on the epistemic standards in play in the context of utterance. Moreover, they claim that whilst epistemic standards are relatively undemanding in everyday conversational contexts, so that assertions of ascription sentences in these contexts are generally true, in sceptical conversational contexts in which we are taking the sceptical problem—and thus sceptical hypotheses—seriously, the epistemic standards get raised so that assertions of these same sentences will now express falsehoods. In this way, the attributer contextualist can hold that whilst it can be true to say of us from the perspective of an everyday conversational context that we know that we are, say, currently seated, it can also be true to say of us from the perspective of

a sceptical conversational context (and where all that has changed is the conversational context) that we do *not* know that we are currently seated. Furthermore, since attributer contextualists retain the closure principle, it follows that in those contexts in which it is true to say of us that we know that we are not currently seated it will also be the case that we know that we are not, for example, BIVs (provided, of course, that we know the relevant entailment). Thus, since there are some epistemic standards relative to which we do know that we are not BIVs, it follows that attributer contextualists, like neo-Mooreans, are in a position to reject the first premise that we are unable to know anti-sceptical propositions of this sort.

The relative merits of these two views are well-known, but it won't do any harm to remind ourselves of the main points. Let's start with the advantages that are common to both positions. Essentially, these are two-fold. First, that there is nothing in either of these views which conflicts with the highly intuitive closure principle for knowledge. Second, that both views can do justice to the common-sense intuition that we are able to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses (insofar as we know anything).

Next, let's review the relative advantages of each position. Attributer contextualists have a diagnostic advantage over neo-Mooreans, or so they claim, in that they can account for why we find the sceptical argument so attractive, even though it is not, strictly speaking, sound. After all, on this view there is a context in which what the sceptic says is true since, relative to the epistemic standards in play when we are in sceptical conversational contexts, it is true to say that we don't know both everyday and anti-sceptical propositions. Contextualists can thus do justice to our sceptical intuitions without thereby acceding to the sceptic all the (unqualified) premises of her argument. Moreover, contextualists can also account for why, although we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses (relative to low epistemic standards), it is problematic to say that we do. Their explanation for this, in essence, is that saying that we have such knowledge will, typically at least, put one in a sceptical conversational context, thereby changing the epistemic standards and making what is asserted false.

There is also a compelling consideration in favour of the neo-Moorean thesis, however, which is that whilst the attributer contextualist denies *two* aspects of the sceptical argument—namely, the first premise and the invariantism (non-contextualism) about 'knowledge' that is presupposed in that argument—the neo-Moorean only denies one. That is, whilst contextualists are saddled with two counterintuitive aspects of their position that they must account for—their denial of S1 and their contextualism—all the neo-Moorean has to explain is their denial of S1. This gives neo-Mooreanism a significant dialectical advantage over contextualism.

Moreover, it is not as if the diagnostic story that the contextualist tells is, *prima facie* at least, all that superior to the one available to the neo-Moorean. For note that neo-Mooreans, as the name suggests, are not mere Mooreans. That is, they do not, as G. E. Moore is often said to have done, go about simply denying what the

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sceptic says. In particular, they do not go about saying that they know everyday propositions, such as that they are currently seated and that, therefore, they know the known to be entailed denials of sceptical hypotheses.<sup>3</sup> Like the contextualist, the neo-Moorean recognises that there is something improper about making assertions of this sort. Crucially, however, and unlike the contextualist, the neo-Moorean claim is that the impropriety of the assertion is solely conversational and dialectical. That is, the neo-Moorean contends that to make the kind of anti-sceptical assertions associated with Mooreanism is to say something conversationally improper (because, say, it conversationally implies something false) and dialectically improper (because it offends against the dialectical rules in play in this exchange with the sceptical adversary). What the neo-Moorean does not say, however, is that such assertions are inappropriate because they are *false*.

This point is important, since in effect the neo-Moorean is claiming that there is a context-sensitivity in play in our assertions which employ epistemic terms like 'knows', but denies that the kind of context-sensitivity at issue will support contextualism on the grounds that it is merely a context-sensitivity in what can properly be said, not in what it is true to say. To give one example of how such a claim might run, it may be that there are conversational contexts in which to assert apparently mundane knowledge claims would be conversationally inappropriate because it would conversationally imply something false, even though what is asserted is true. If the neo-Moorean can make a claim of this sort stick, then it will go a long way to undercutting the appeal of the contextualist thesis, since it would highlight how one could explain away the apparent context-sensitivity in our use of epistemic terms without actually going so far as to endorse the revisionist thesis of contextualism.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, if part to the appeal of contextualism is that it can tell a story about why we are taken in by the sceptical argument in the first place, then that appeal will straightforwardly transfer across to neo-Mooreanism since it tells a similar—and far less revisionist—story about how the propriety of one's knowledge-ascribing assertions can be affected by one's engagement with the sceptical problem.

There is a further reason for thinking that neo-Mooreanism has the edge over attributer contextualism, and this is that there is something inherently concessive about the contextualist thesis. After all, contextualists do allow that the sceptic is, in an important sense, right in what she says. That is, it is not just that the contextualist allows that there is a (sceptical) context in which it would be true to say that we do not know either everyday propositions or the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Instead, the contextualist goes further than this and actually allows that the sceptical context is a context that employs more exacting epistemic standards. This is problematic in that it puts the sceptic in an epistemically privileged position relative to the anti-sceptic, a concession that the neo-Moorean does not make. If we can resolve the sceptical problematic without making a concession of this sort—one that prompts the natural thought that, *strictly speaking*, the sceptic

is right after all—then that would surely be preferable.<sup>5</sup> Thus, whilst there are considerations in favour of both the neo-Moorean and the contextualist anti-sceptical proposals, I think it is clear that it is the neo-Moorean account that has the upper hand.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Evidential Sceptical Challenge

The problem, however, is that even if it is true that there is a plausible position available to us that offers, at least in principle, a satisfactory response to the sceptical challenge as we formulated above, this is going to be of little comfort unless we are also persuaded that this formulation of the sceptical challenge captures that challenge in its strongest guise. And, indeed, there is good reason to think that it isn't. For what neither of the anti-sceptical proposals just sketched get to grips with is the further issue of what the evidential basis of our anti-sceptical knowledge is. That is, both of these views allow that we can indeed know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, and yet in neither case are we given very much in the way of a story about how such knowledge is possessed. This is important, because we can re-phrase the sceptical challenge in evidential terms as follows:

- S1' S's evidence cannot favour her belief that she is seated (and much else besides) over the (known to be incompatible) hypothesis that she is a BIV.
- S2' If S's evidence does not favour her belief that she is seated (and much else besides) over the (known to be incompatible) hypothesis that she is a BIV, then S lacks evidence for believing that she is currently seated (and much else besides).

*Hence:*

- SC' S cannot have evidence for believing that she is currently seated (and much else besides).

Of course, the conclusion of this argument is different to the one we considered above, in that it does not say that the subject lacks knowledge of what most of what she believes, only that she lacks evidence for it. But note that such a conclusion is just around the corner, since whilst we might be willing to grant that certain kinds of propositions can be non-evidentially known, it can hardly be the case that most (if not all) of what we think we know we know non-evidentially. Thus, if this conclusion is allowed to stand then it threatens to undermine our knowledge in just the same way as the closure-based argument we considered above.

Moreover, it seems that the premises of this argument are just as compelling as the premises of the earlier sceptical argument, if not more so. For one thing, the motivation for the second premise seems secure. In effect, the principle being appealed to here is an 'underdetermination' principle which states that if one lacks

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evidence which favours the target proposition over known to be incompatible alternatives, then one lacks evidence for believing the target proposition.<sup>7</sup> Denying this principle doesn't seem to be a very attractive way forward, since it would hardly be an intellectually satisfying response to the problem of scepticism to argue that one could have evidential support for a belief even when the evidence in question fails to favour that belief over a known to be incompatible alternative. This would be a very flimsy notion of 'evidential support', and hardly one that has much in the way of *anti*-sceptical appeal.

The trouble is, of course, that the first premise is highly intuitive as well, since it does seem to be true that we cannot have evidence that favours our everyday beliefs over (known to be incompatible) sceptical alternatives, because, *ex hypothesi*, the sceptical alternatives are phenomenologically indistinguishable from everyday scenarios. Furthermore, if our evidence does not favour our everyday beliefs in this way, then in what sense can we regard our everyday beliefs as evidentially grounded?

The challenge to both the neo-Moorean and the contextualist is thus to offer some way of evading this argument, and this is going to mean either showing that we can have evidential support for our beliefs in everyday propositions which favours this belief over the known to be incompatible sceptical alternatives; or else showing that adequate evidential support for our beliefs in everyday propositions is consistent with an inability to rule-out the incompatible sceptical alternatives.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Evidential Neo-Mooreanism

The way the neo-Moorean accounts for our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses is typically via an appeal to a 'safety' principle, a principle which (roughly) demands that one's belief should be counterfactually responsive to the truth in the sense that, in most near-by possible worlds in which one believes the same proposition on the same basis as in the actual world, that belief is true.<sup>9</sup> So, for example, provided the actual world is in fact roughly as we take it to be, so that sceptical error-possibilities are indeed far-fetched (and thus the kinds of possibilities that only obtain in far-off worlds), then our beliefs in everyday propositions will tend to be safe, since in most (if not all) near-by possible worlds in which we believe that, for example, we have two hands (because that's what we can see before us), then this belief will be true. For the same reason, our beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses will also be safe, at least in the circumstances described. If there is no near-by possible world in which I am, say, a BIV, then in all near-by possible worlds where I believe that I'm not a BIV I will have a true belief, and thus my belief will be safe.<sup>10</sup>

Contextualists are typically quite coy about explaining how such anti-sceptical knowledge comes about, but where a story is offered—as in DeRose (1995)—it tends to run along broadly similar safety-based lines. What is interesting about this

style of epistemological theorising is that it is resolutely externalist, in that it allows knowledge even in cases where, *ex hypothesi*, the agent lacks an adequate internalist justification for her belief. That is, it is usually granted to the sceptic that we lack sufficient reflectively accessible grounds for believing in the denials of sceptical hypotheses—this is taken to be a straightforward consequence of the phenomenological indistinguishability of sceptical scenarios—and thus that we are unable to have an internalist justification for holding such beliefs. Nevertheless, the claim is that we can still have knowledge of such propositions, even despite lacking a justification of this sort, and this indicates a clear commitment to epistemological externalism.

This style of argument offers little help when it comes to the evidential formulation of the sceptical problem, however, in that it just seems to leave this version of the problem unanswered. If our evidence is understood along the usual internalist lines in terms of that which we have reflective access to, then clearly a lack of an internalist justification entails a lack of evidence of this sort. Our anti-sceptical ‘knowledge’ is thus non-evidential, and this means, given the evidential formulation of the sceptical argument, that our ‘knowledge’ in general is non-evidential, and thus not obviously knowledge at all.

There is a way of dealing with this problem, however, which is to extend the externalist account to evidence, thereby allowing that one’s evidence goes beyond simply that which one has special reflective access to. After all, just as the thesis that knowledge demands adequate reflectively accessible grounds is a characteristic internalist thesis, so the claim that one’s evidence should be understood solely in terms of what one has reflective access to is likewise a characteristic internalist thesis. Accordingly, just as the externalist will reject the former internalist thesis, it is similarly open to them to question the latter thesis as well. This is, in any case, the kind of route that I think the neo-Moorean should explore. On this picture, an agent can have evidence in favour of her belief in a proposition even though there is a known alternative to that proposition—such as a sceptical hypothesis—which the agent possesses no reflectively accessible grounds that would suffice to eliminate. Note that the claim is not that underdetermination should go—in that one can have evidence in favour of belief in a proposition even though there is a known alternative to that proposition which the agent lacks evidence that would suffice to eliminate—but rather the externalist thesis that one’s evidence can extend beyond what one has reflectively access to. If this claim can be made plausible, then so long as circumstances are in fact sufficiently normal—so that sceptical possibilities are indeed far-off, modally—then one’s evidence for believing everyday propositions can suffice to exclude sceptical alternatives even though the sceptical alternative is phenomenologically indistinguishable such that the agent lacks any reflectively accessible grounds for eliminating that alternative.

To begin with, it is important to note that there is a certain amount of everyday linguistic evidence in favour of a thesis of this sort. It is quite common, for example,

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to back-up our perceptual claims by offering *factive* perceptual evidence—that is, evidence which *entails* the proposition believed. For example, if I were asked (by someone on the other end of the telephone, say) how it is that I know that my colleague is in work today, one entirely acceptable response would be to say that I can see that he is here in my office, where ‘seeing that’ is *factive*—one can only see that something is the case if it is, in fact, the case.<sup>11</sup> If the internalist conception of evidence is correct, however, then these locutions should not be taken at face value since my perpetual evidence in fact never extends beyond the phenomenal and thus never license a *factive* claim. As the sceptical scenarios are supposed to show, I could possess the evidence that I have in normal non-sceptical cases in a parallel sceptical case, and yet my belief be false. It seems then that we have a common sense account of perceptual evidence, which the neo-Moorean wants to make use of, and a philosophical account, which plays into the hands of the internalist and the sceptic. *Prima facie* at least, this is good news for the neo-Moorean, since it means that, yet again, she is on the side of our everyday conception of our epistemic concepts in contrast to the proponents of alternative views.

Such *prima facie* support is of little use, however, without some further story that accounts for the undoubted appeal of the phenomenal—and thus internalist—conception of evidence put forward by the sceptic and others. Significantly, although the phenomenal conception of evidence has been the dominant conception in the philosophical literature, there have been some prominent defenders of the common sense account, most notably John McDowell (e.g., 1982, *passim*) and Timothy Williamson (e.g., 2000b). In essence, the source of their complaint with the phenomenal conception of evidence is that employs a ‘highest common factor’ style reasoning which equates the agent’s evidence in the ‘good’ case where she is not being deceived with what her evidence would be in a parallel (i.e., phenomenologically indistinguishable) ‘bad’ case in which widespread deception is taking place. It is not clear why those generally impressed by externalism should be persuaded by a line of argument of this sort. Moreover, there are compelling arguments which purport to show that the content of one’s perceptual experience could be different even in two phenomenologically indistinguishable cases, and since one’s perceptual experience surely forms part of one’s perceptual evidence, this too would lend support to a general resistance to the phenomenal account of evidence.<sup>12</sup>

It is not my intention to go into detail about this point here, only to note that there is an issue in this respect, and thus that the externalist neo-Moorean should not immediately concede the phenomenal account of evidence to the sceptic.<sup>13</sup> Remember that our primary goal is to evaluate the relative merits of the neo-Moorean and contextualist anti-sceptical theses. As we will see in a moment, however, the contextualist will have to make a similar move to the neo-Moorean in this regard. Accordingly, what problems there are for a strategy of this sort will be shared by both views, and thus we need not dwell here on the prospects of the specifically neo-Moorean use of this strategy.

#### 4. Evidential Contextualism—Neta and Williams

Like neo-Mooreans, contextualists face the same problem of how to account for the evidential basis of our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses, and in doing so respond to the problem posed by the evidential sceptical argument. In particular, they face the same dilemma between either allowing the phenomenal conception of evidence, and then trying to explain how it is possible, consistent with this conception, that our ‘knowledge’ in general has an evidential grounding; or else opting for an externalist conception of evidence and then doing the hard theoretical work of motivating such a view in opposition to the prevailing wisdom in this regard, just like the neo-Moorean.

Unsurprisingly, contextualists usually deal with this problem by not discussing it at all. When they do, however, they explicitly recognise its failings in this respect. Cohen, for example, is willing to grant that the only empirical evidence available for one’s beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses would be the evidence gained via an inference from the evidential support that one’s beliefs in everyday propositions enjoy, coupled with the relevant known entailment from the everyday propositions to the anti-sceptical proposition. He notes, however, that such an inference would constitute “objectionable reasoning” and thus that we must look elsewhere to account for this knowledge. His suggestion is to regard this knowledge as being in some sense *a priori*, so that it doesn’t require an empirical evidential support, even though the contingent propositions in question are not obvious candidates to enjoy such a status. The choice is thus between a rock and a hard place. Here is Cohen:

What should we conclude? Our options seem to be accepting contingent *a priori* knowledge or endorsing what looks to be objectionable reasoning. However we go then, there is a distasteful consequence. But then again skepticism is a distasteful consequence—and I would maintain more so than any consequence of a contextualist account.

He continues, and here Cohen must surely be applauded for his intellectual honesty:

Which contextualist alternative is the best? I prefer the one that endorses *a priori* rationality, but that may be mostly a statement about which bullet I am most prepared to bite. (Cohen 2000, 106)

The problem here, however, is the unquestioned commitment to the phenomenal conception of evidence, since it is only by the lights of this account of evidence that it is problematic to suppose that one’s beliefs in anti-sceptical propositions are unable to enjoy (empirical) evidential support. If we could reject the phenomenal conception of evidence, then we wouldn’t be faced with this sort of dilemma. But then, as I will argue in a moment, if we could reject the phenomenal conception of evidence perhaps we wouldn’t be attracted by a contextualist response to the sceptical problem in the first place.

Nevertheless, one might see in contextualism a way of extending the thesis so that it can deal with the specific evidential problem posed by the sceptic. Perhaps,

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that is, we should treat evidence in a context-sensitive way, so that what counts as evidence fluctuates from context to context. On this view, we can account for why the evidence we cite in favour of our perceptual beliefs in normal contexts includes factive perceptual evidence, whilst also accounting for why the evidence we can legitimately cite in favour of our beliefs in sceptical contexts is limited to merely non-factive phenomenal evidence. The thought would be that the raising of the epistemic standards that (the contextualist claims) occurs when one enters sceptical contexts affects what we can legitimately say about an agent's knowledge because it affects what counts as legitimate evidence in favour of the relevant belief. Thus, simplifying somewhat, what counts as our evidence is quite broad in undemanding everyday contexts, and thus we tend to have a lot of knowledge in those contexts; whilst our evidence can become quite restrictive in sceptical contexts, and thus we tend to lack knowledge in these contexts.

More precisely, what counts as our evidence in normal contexts includes factive perceptual evidence, which is why we have adequate evidential grounds not only for having knowledge of everyday propositions but also for (the known to be entailed) anti-sceptical propositions. In contrast, in sceptical contexts what counts as evidence shrinks to the purely phenomenal and this explains not only why we cannot know the denials of sceptical hypotheses in these contexts, but also why, given this fact and the closure principle for knowledge, we are unable to have knowledge of everyday propositions either. Accordingly, we can be true to the intuitions that drive both our everyday manner of employing factive perceptual evidence *and* the phenomenal conception of evidence.

Just such an evidential contextualist position has been recently defended by Ram Neta (2002; 2003), and clearly there is a lot to commend it given that unlike standard contextualist models it deals with the challenge posed by evidential scepticism. There is a fundamental problem facing this proposal, however—a problem which it shares with the standard contextualist accounts—which is that by allowing the high-standards conception of evidence evidential contextualism seems to concede the intuitive force of the sceptical argument. That is, epistemically high standards contexts are, by their nature, epistemically privileged contexts, and thus to allow that in such contexts the only evidence we can appeal to is phenomenal evidence seems to concede that the only evidence we *really* have is phenomenal evidence, even though we might—loosely, as it turns out—appeal to non-phenomenal factive evidence in everyday contexts. What is needed by proponents of a view of this sort is thus some account of why our everyday evidential practices are legitimate even despite the fact that raising the standards employed in these contexts would destroy the knowledge gained via these evidential practices. The problem for such a proposal, however, is that any account of this sort would tend to undermine the position by making it plausible to suppose that we can reject the restrictions imposed by the phenomenal account of evidence in *all* conversational contexts. That is, the choice seems to be between allowing contextualism about ev-

idence, but then conceding the epistemically privileged status of the sceptical context; or else disputing the epistemic hegemony of sceptical standards, but at the expense of undermining the evidential contextualism.

There is also a further problem. The interesting case for the contextualist about knowledge is that in which we have two counterpart agents where the only difference between the situations that the two agents find themselves in is a conversational difference, but where the first agent speaks truly by saying 'I know that P', whilst the second agent speaks falsely. A natural way of understanding such a pair of cases is by saying that the evidence which the two counterparts have is exactly the same, it's just that the strength of evidence one needs in order to know is different in the two contexts because of the different conversational standards in play. In this way, one isolates epistemic differences from mere conversational differences. This is important because that two otherwise counterpart agents could have identical beliefs with a different epistemic status where there is an epistemic difference between their two situations is hardly contentious, and lends no support at all for contextualism.

Clearly, however, an evidential contextualist like Neta cannot help himself to this move, since by his lights the evidence possessed by the two counterpart agents is not the same. If this is so, however, then it appears to follow that more than just conversational differences are in play as regards the situations that the two counterparts find themselves in. Instead, the two agents are in different *epistemic* situations, and now it becomes unclear what the motivation for evidential contextualism is supposed to be. That is, what is it that holds fast between these two supposedly epi-stemically equivalent contexts? And if there is an epistemic difference between them, then why explain the different truth-values of assertions of the relevant knowledge ascribing sentences in each case in contextualist terms, rather than simply in epistemic terms?<sup>14</sup>

One way in which the evidential contextualist might try to deal with these problems facing Neta's account is by turning to the work of Michael Williams (e.g., 1991). Williams' claim is that merely noting the context-sensitivity of the relevant epistemic term—whether 'knowledge', 'justification', or 'evidence'—is not enough to meet the sceptical problem. Rather one should also offer a theoretical diagnosis that undermines the sceptical challenge. For sure, Williams does end up with a form of contextualism, but it is very different to the kinds of contextualism advocated by DeRose, Lewis, Cohen, Neta and others. There are lots of differences that one could explore here, but to consider them all would be to take us too far afield. Instead, we will focus on just the key points of difference.<sup>15</sup>

First, however, an overview of Williams' view. Williams claims that epistemic evaluation is always context-sensitive, where what determines a context is evidential structure—what is evaluated relative to what, and thus what stands fast (and thus is not open to evaluation in that context) relative to what is open to question. In this respect, Williams' view is like Neta's, in that what counts as evidence for what can

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change from context to context. Williams argues, for example, that in sceptical contexts propositions which describe the phenomenal contents of one's mental states—i.e., which describe how the world appears to one—have an “epistemic priority” relative to propositions describing objects in an external world—i.e., which describe how the world is. This means that the epistemic status of one's beliefs in the latter propositions is dependent upon the epistemic status of one's beliefs in the former propositions. So construed, the sceptical context incorporates a commitment to the phenomenal conception of evidence, in that one's evidence does not extend beyond the phenomenal propositions, and thus our knowledge of the external world is problematized.

In other contexts, however, Williams argues that a different epistemic priority could be in play. He cites a context in which a psychological investigation is taking place as an example in this regard. Here the experimenter might make judgments about what the phenomenal contents of an agent's mental states are by making inferences that employ propositions regarding world-involving propositions, such as regarding the agent's behaviour. In general, Williams claims that in non-sceptical contexts the kind of scepticism-friendly epistemic priority at issue in the phenomenal conception of evidence does not hold, and this leaves it open that our everyday reason-giving practices could exhibit the scepticism-hostile evidential practices that form part of our everyday (non-phenomenal) conception of evidence.

Where Williams departs from Neta, however, is by denying that there is an epistemic hierarchy of contexts. That is, it is not that sceptical contexts employ ‘high’ demanding epistemic standards, whilst everyday (or discipline-specific) contexts employ relatively ‘low’ epistemic standards, which is what Neta (in line with the standard contextualist picture) claims. Indeed, for Williams, there would be no way in which one could make such a context-independent evaluation of the different epistemic standards being employed since all epistemic evaluations are themselves relative to a context. Instead, Williams' claim is that different contexts are just that, *different*, not more or less epistemically demanding.

Now one might respond to this by claiming that what differentiates, say, the non-sceptical psychological context from the sceptical context is that the existence of an external world is being—at least implicitly—presupposed in the psychological case, in the sense that to grant the possibility that propositions about the external world can have an epistemic priority relative to propositions about an agent's mental states is already to take the falsity of scepticism for granted. In this way, the sceptical context is a context without presuppositions, and thus a context that has, in this sense, an epistemic ascendancy over non-sceptical contexts.

Williams disputes this, however, arguing that all contexts take propositions for granted, in the sense that these propositions are not epistemically evaluable in that context. Indeed, he claims that it is these ‘given’ propositions—or, as he calls them, “methodological necessities”—which, at least in part, determine the epistemic structure of that context by setting constraints on what can be evaluated rel-

ative to what in that context. That is, Williams grants that the context of a psychological investigation might take certain key claims as given, such as (though we will qualify this in a moment) anti-sceptical claims concerning the fact that we are not radically deceived in our beliefs about the world. Moreover, he argues that it is these methodological necessities which, in part, determine the context, since if one were to epi-stemically evaluate such a proposition then this would change the context—in this case change it from a context of psychological inquiry to a sceptical context.

Williams maintains, however, that the sceptical context also takes certain claims for granted, such as what Williams calls the thesis of “epistemological realism”. This is realism about the objects of epistemological inquiry, and consists of the claim that via philosophical reflection we can determine an underlying context-invariant epistemic structure that underpins, and is partly revealed in, our ordinary use of epistemic terms. He writes that to reject epistemological realism is to allow that

[. . .] the epistemic status of a given proposition is liable to shift with situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors: it is to hold that, independently of such influences, a proposition has no epistemic status whatsoever. (Williams 1991, 119)<sup>16</sup>

Without the anti-contextualist assumption of the truth of epistemological realism, the sceptical claim that knowledge possession is impossible would not make sense, since all the sceptic has discovered is that by the lights of a particular context, one which employs a specific epistemic structure and takes certain claims for granted, knowledge is impossible, not that knowledge is impossible *simpliciter*. As Williams puts the point:

The sceptic takes himself to have discovered, under the conditions of philosophical reflection, that knowledge of the world is impossible. But in fact, the most he has discovered is that knowledge of the world is *impossible under the conditions of philosophical reflection*. (Williams 1991, 130)

So the sceptical context is in this sense epistemically on a par with any other context. Note, however, that if the methodological necessities of a context cannot be epistemically evaluated in that context, then this must mean that they cannot be known in that context. Doesn’t this undermine the possibility that one might gain knowledge within such a context? Not according to Williams, who argues that all that is important is that these claims must be true, not known to be true (he takes this to be allowed by any plausible rendering of epistemological externalism). As long as they are true, then that context can be knowledge-supporting. Accordingly, in an everyday context, just so long as the relevant methodological necessities are true—and these will surely include anti-sceptical assumptions about how one is not presently, and undetectably, subject to a massive deception—then one can gain knowledge about the world from simply seeing that things are thus-and-so.

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But what about closure? It seems that Williams' view must grant that we could, in an everyday context, know various facts about the external world, such as that we have limbs and fingers, and yet not know what we know to be entailed by this knowledge—*viz.*, that we are not disembodied BIVs. Like all contextualists, Williams wants to maintain closure for knowledge,<sup>17</sup> and he can go part of the way to doing this by contending that to explicitly draw out these anti-sceptical consequences of one's beliefs would be to alter the context in such a way that it would no longer be true to say that one knew anything of substance, thereby leaving closure intact. But of course, one does not need to explicitly raise these possibilities in order to have anti-sceptical beliefs and knowledge of the relevant entailment, so more must be done in this respect.

What Williams claims is that the presuppositions of a context are not, as they first seem, simply (local and global) anti-sceptical theses, but are rather more specifically *reliability conditions* for that context—conditions which, if true, are knowledge-conducive. The difference here is subtle, but in essence it is that a reliability condition is a condition the obtaining of which is necessary if you are to know that P, but which is not entailed by P itself. So, for example, that my perceptual faculties are generally reliable in 'normal' circumstances is a pre-condition of my coming to know via these means that I have limbs, but the mere reliability of these faculties does not entail the truth of my belief that I have limbs, since they could be reliable and yet, as it happens, something has gone awry such that although it looks as if I have limbs this 'seeming' is, in fact, false. In this way, in a non-sceptical context in which these reliability conditions are taken for granted and so are treated as unevaluable in that context, one can come to know everyday perceptual claims just so long as these conditions obtain. Moreover, if one gains this knowledge and knows the relevant entailment, then one can also come to know the anti-sceptical claim as well, and know it in virtue, in part, of the perceptual evidence that grounds one's knowledge of the everyday perceptual claim, in accordance with the non-phenomenal conception of evidence described above. So one can know that, say, one is not a BIV in virtue of knowing that one has limbs (because one can see that one has limbs) and knowing the relevant entailment—it is just that one cannot, in this context, come to know that the faculties one is employing to gain the original knowledge are reliable. Moreover, since it is not contrary to closure that one has knowledge of perceptual propositions whilst failing to have knowledge of the reliability conditions of this perceptual knowledge, so no failure of closure results.

Of course, one might object to this that although it is clearly true that my perceptual faculties could be generally reliable in the circumstances in which they are being employed and yet there be particular perceptual beliefs I have which are false, surely such a reliability condition couldn't be true without it thereby following that I am *not* a BIV? After all, part of the point of such a sceptical hypothesis is that one's perceptual faculties are now no longer reliable in such circumstances. Williams can evade

this objection, however, since he will simply point out that the truth of the BIV hypotheses is entirely consistent with the obtaining of the relevant reliability condition. After all, the claim is that one's perceptual faculties are reliable in the normal circumstances to which they are suited, and the BIV scenario is clearly an 'abnormal' circumstance. In any case, it is worth remembering that the belief-forming processes that one is employing if one is a BIV are very different from the processes in play if one is not a BIV and circumstances are normal. That is, it is not as if one is employing unreliable perceptual faculties when one is a BIV—rather, one is not employing perceptual faculties at all (but merely seeming to do so).

Nevertheless, there is something deeply suspect about Williams' line on closure. For one thing, it seems that the anti-sceptical entailments of what one believes in normal contexts are just as 'presupposed' as the relevant reliability conditions. After all, in both cases one cannot bring them to the fore for epistemic evaluation without changing the context, and Williams himself recognises this by conceding that we cannot properly claim to know anti-sceptical claims (p. 355) and that, relatedly, we cannot coherently ever argue for the denials of sceptical hypotheses by making appeal, *à la* Moore, to our knowledge of more mundane perceptual facts (p. 353). Given these features of our beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses, it is unclear why they are not methodological necessities of a context in just the same way as reliability conditions.

Moreover, closer inspection of the moving parts of Williams' view reveals a further problem. Williams claims that in order to be able to gain knowledge in a context it is only necessary that the methodological necessities of that context be true, not that they also be known to be true. Crucially, however, he also claims, on *a priori* grounds, that the sceptical presupposition of epistemological realism—which is held to be the key methodological necessity of the sceptical context—is false. If this is right, then the sceptic is unable to "discover" anything in the sceptical context, not even something that is restricted in scope to the constraints of that context. But what then is the motivation for conceding *anything* to the sceptic? In particular, why should we allow that the limited conception of evidence encapsulated in the phenomenal account of evidence, and which makes the sceptical problem so compelling, should be acceded to at all, in any context? It seems that Williams' contextualism, understood consistently, warrants us in simply sticking with the non-phenomenal conception in everyday contexts and treating the sceptical use of the phenomenal conception as somehow mistaken.

Furthermore, if we are willing to contend, as Williams does, that sometimes one can have knowledge even though one is unable to legitimately argue for that knowledge or otherwise properly claim it, then it seems that the right thing to do is not to go contextualist in response to the sceptic but rather explore the possibility that the restricted conception of evidence that the sceptic tricks us into accepting somehow reflects dialectical constraints, or at least pragmatic constraints on warranted assertion. In this way, we can retain the anti-sceptical thrust of the non-phenomenal

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conception of evidence whilst being true to sceptical intuitions that drive the acceptance of the phenomenal conception.

### 5. Back to Evidential Neo-Mooreanism

We need to look a little closer at the manner in which we offer evidence in normal contexts. What is uncontroversial is that it is a general conversational rule that one should only make an assertion provided that one is in a position to appropriately back-up that assertion with evidence. If one grants, then, as most epistemic externalists do, that one can have knowledge in the absence of supporting evidence, then it follows that sometimes one will have knowledge even though one cannot properly claim that knowledge because one cannot offer evidence in favour of it. Perhaps some of our perceptual knowledge is of this ungrounded form, such that, whilst possessed, it cannot be properly claimed to be possessed. Nevertheless, one would hope that one could properly claim to have a wide class of perceptual knowledge, even by externalist lights, since otherwise one's epistemic position would be rather mute. Moreover, that one is able to properly claim one's everyday perceptual knowledge would seem to be entailed by the everyday non-phenomenal conception of evidence, in that it is part of this conception of evidence that we are able to cite appropriate evidence in favour of our everyday perceptual beliefs. As we will see, however, simply possessing evidence in favour of a proposition will not suffice to enable the assertion of that proposition to be appropriate, since other constraints on appropriate assertion also apply.

One feature of the way in which we offer evidence in favour of our beliefs that Wittgenstein (1969) draws to our attention is that it is, in normal circumstances at least, inappropriate to assert propositions which are as obvious as any—such as that one has two hands (when one's hands are clear for everyone to see)—because there is no evidence available that could be appropriately cited in favour of such a proposition. The reason why there is no appropriate supporting evidence available is that for an item of evidence to play a supporting role it needs to be more certain than the proposition that it is supporting. Accordingly, if the target proposition is as certain as any, then it follows that there could be no *supporting* evidence of this sort. Hence, to assert the target proposition would be to offend against the conversational rule that one should only make an assertion if one is in a position to offer appropriate evidence to back-up that assertion.

Some have taken this feature at face value as indicating that we just do not have evidence in favour of our beliefs in such 'obvious' propositions. Indeed, once one has gone this far, then it becomes plausible to suppose that one's belief in this regard is not only not evidentially supported, but that neither is it an instance of knowledge either.<sup>18</sup> Neta (2003, 10) rejects such a reading of the data, however, and I think that he is right to do so. Clearly we do in these circumstances have evidence in favour of our belief that we have two hands—the problem is simply that

it is inappropriate to cite such evidence because it doesn't play the required supporting role in that conversational context.

The nub of the issue is that the presentation of evidence plays a dialectical role that is relative to the beliefs of the participants in a conversational context. It would, for example, be at least typically inappropriate to cite in defence of one's claim (about which all participants to that conversational context are certain) that the earth is round that one was told this by one's geography teacher. Part of the reason for this is that the supporting ground is clearly less certain than the proposition that it is meant to ground, and thus it is unable to play the required supporting role in this context. Similarly, one cannot properly cite what one sees as evidence in favour of the existence of one's hands which are clear to view for everyone, since that one sees one's hands is no more certain than that one has them. (Relatedly, as Wittgenstein points out (1969, §125), if one doubts that one has two hands, then why trust the fact that one seems to see one's hands before one? If the former is questionable, then why not the latter as well?).

Of course, this is not to deny that sometimes evidence of this sort is appropriately cited, as when a child offers the testimony of her geography teacher in favour of her claim that the earth is round, but this simply reflects the fact that at least one of the participants—in this case the child—is not more certain of the supported claim than of the supporting evidence, and the audience is making allowances for this fact. Moreover, there are clearly going to be complicated and penumbral cases in this regard, where it isn't clear if the rule applies and, if so, how it is to be met.<sup>19</sup> What do we do, for example, if participants to a conversational context have very different views as to what is more certain in this regard? In general, I think that we try to accommodate disagreement of this sort in our conversational exchanges by not making conversational moves that would be inappropriate by another participant's lights, even though they would be appropriate by our lights, though clearly there are exceptions to this. So, for example, we might make allowances for those (adults) who are unsure of the roundness of the earth but confident of the testimony of teachers—though even this stretches the imagination somewhat—but would we do the same for those who are more confident about the testimony of a teacher who told them that they hands than that they had hands (where, as before, their hands are entirely open to view)?

This accommodation of reasonable disagreements when it comes to the assignments of certainty amongst the beliefs of the participants of a conversational context points towards a second, and inter-related, dialectical constraint on the appropriate citation of evidence. This concerns how the evidence that we are in a position to cite in favour of our assertions ought to be non-question-begging in that conversational context. For example, in a context in which all the participants believe in a theistic God, it will be entirely appropriate (on this score at least) to cite supporting evidence which presupposes the existence of this God. So, for example, one might support one's claim that one ought not to steal by citing the evidence of

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God's will to this effect in a religious text (at least where the latter isn't regarded as being less certain than the former by the participants of that context). Contrast this case, however, with one in which a believer is conversing with a non-believer. In this scenario, for the believer to cite as evidence in favour of a claim something which presupposes the existence of God, such as a claim to do with the evidence of God's will found in scripture, would clearly be inappropriate, since this presupposition is not shared by the other member of this conversational context.

This represents a further reason why one is not always in a position to properly offer evidence—such as regarding what one sees—in favour of one's belief in the existence of one's hands. After all, if one is participating in a conversational context where the other participant either is, or is taking on the role of, the sceptic, then citing such evidence would be clearly improper. The sceptic is, remember, disputing whether or not you really do see what you take yourself to see, and thus it would be inappropriate to cite as evidence a ground which takes it as given that you really do see what you take yourself to see, as would be the case if one defends one's claim that one has two hands by citing the factive reason that one sees that one has two hands. Of course, one could legitimately, in this regard at least, cite the supporting reason that one *seems to see* that one has two hands, since the sceptic doesn't dispute this. Thus, on dialectical grounds alone, we are pushed back to the phenomenal conception of evidence.

Moreover, putting this dialectical point together with the point made earlier about the need for supporting evidence to be (regarded as) more certain than that which it is evidence for, we can see just why it is so inappropriate to claim to know that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis, especially when one tries to support such a claim with the factive evidence regarding what one sees. After all, in a context in which we are taking sceptical hypotheses seriously it can no longer be just taken as given that all participants to this conversational exchange accept that it is more certain that, say, one see that one has two hands, as that one is not a BIV. Accordingly, such evidence cannot be properly entered in support of this claim and, since this is the only available supporting evidence that is robust enough (seeming to see that one has two hands is of little use in this regard), this means that one cannot appropriately back-up this claim. The assertion is thus either inappropriately supported by evidence or not supported at all, and either way it is an improper assertion.<sup>20</sup>

So one cannot properly claim to know that one has two hands, and neither can one properly claim to know that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis (and one certainly cannot properly claim to know that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis on the grounds that one has two hands which one can see right before one). Furthermore, in sceptical conversational contexts one cannot properly claim to know any world-involving proposition. It is little wonder, then, that in the face of scepticism we seem drawn back into the weaker phenomenal account of evidence. Equally, however, we have also seen that it does not immediately follow

from this feature of the way in which we cite evidence that merely phenomenal evidence is all the evidence we have in favour of our perceptual beliefs.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The moral is that we cannot properly argue with the sceptic head-on—that is, engage in a conversational context in which we take such an issue seriously and yet also try to meet that issue with assertions that do not offend against the conversational rules. Moorean responses to scepticism which try to do just this are thus ruled-out, and this accounts for our intuition that there is something wrong with this style of anti-scepticism. Nevertheless, we can retain our Moorean intuition that even though there is something amiss with this style of reasoning, the assertions made can be true. The sceptic wants to claim that knowledge is impossible, and thus that all claims to know, improper or otherwise, express falsehoods no matter what circumstances they are entered. Instead, it seems, we are able to retain the everyday conception of evidence which does not lead to this conclusion but which instead allows that we can have knowledge of the external world that is grounded in factive reasons, just so long, of course, that we are not in fact radically deceived in the manner that the sceptic alleges.

This approach to scepticism does concede something to the sceptic, though not nearly as much as the unqualified proponent of the phenomenal conception of evidence, or even quite as much as the proponents of an evidential form of contextualism—like Neta and Williams—who allow a restricted form of this conception of evidence. On this view, we should keep to the non-phenomenal account and leave matters at that. The trick is to limit one's concession to the sceptic to that which all parties to this dispute agree (or ought to agree at any rate) should be conceded—that one cannot directly argue with the sceptic whilst keeping to some basic rules for appropriate assertion.

Is this an unqualified victory over the sceptic? Not quite. For what we might have pre-theoretically thought to be a prerequisite of any intellectually satisfying response to the sceptic—that we can authoritatively maintain our claims to know even in the light of the sceptical challenge—is lost, and this is not a cost that should be taken lightly. Indeed, part of the point of the Wittgensteinian approach, something that is also found in Williams' anti-scepticism, is that we should not take our everyday reason-giving practices entirely at face value. We offer evidence in favour of our beliefs in such a way as that it might be thought to imply that the appropriateness of the relevant assertions were not dependent upon contextual considerations at all, as if such evidential support could be applied against *any* potential participant to the conversational context, even a sceptic. As we have seen, however, this is not the case. Rather, our reason-giving practices take place against a backdrop of assignments of certainty which are themselves already anti-sceptical.<sup>21,22</sup>

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## Notes

1. For a survey of the contemporary literature on scepticism that discusses in detail how this formulation of the sceptical problem is central to the recent debate on this topic, see Pritchard (2002c).
2. See, for example, Pritchard (2002a; 2002b; 2005b, chapters 2, 3 & 6).-
3. See Moore (1925; 1939). Whether or not this is in fact a fair interpretation of what Moore was trying to do in these papers is an issue that I set to one side here.
4. DeRose (2002) has claimed that such an invariantist story is never going to stick. For a response, see Pritchard (2005a).
5. Indeed, I've argued elsewhere—in Pritchard (2001)—that the situation is even worse for the contextualist in this respect. For whilst the contextualist has a clear story to tell about how 'epistemic ascent' occurs as one moves from a low standards context to a high standards context, there is no clear story available concerning how one thereafter returns to the low standards context (thereby reuniting oneself with one's knowledge). That is, there is no clear story available regarding how 'epistemic descent' occurs. Without such a story, however, the anti-sceptical force of the contextualist thesis is strictly limited.
6. The literature on contextualism, both for and against, is vast, and so cannot usefully be listed here. A good place to start would be the recent survey article by Black (2003).
7. This principle is plausible even without the demand that the alternatives be known to be incompatible with the target proposition, but since the alternatives we are interested are, typically at least, known to be incompatible with the relevant target propositions, we might as well add this clause so that the principle is understood in its strongest form.
8. For a sustained discussion of the relationship between the closure-based sceptical argument and the 'evidential' sceptical argument just formulated, see Pritchard (2005d).
9. Black (2002) argues for a neo-Moorean view that makes use of the 'sensitivity' principle, a principle that is held by some—most notably Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981)—to entail the rejection of closure. As Black shows, however, properly understood the principle does not have this result. In Pritchard (2005b, chapter 6) I argue that this should not come as a surprise because once one formulates the safety and sensitivity principles correctly then they come out as making roughly the same epistemic demands. For the sake of simplicity, however, we will focus on the formulation of the neo-Moorean view that employs safety here.
10. There are important issues to be dealt with here, of course. For example, this strategy only works if we do tend to retain our anti-sceptical beliefs in near-by worlds, and one might question this. For my own part, I'm inclined to think that such beliefs are involuntary in that one can't help but have a general anti-sceptical doxastic response to the world, and thus that where the relevant entailments are known one can't help holding anti-sceptical beliefs of this sort. See Wittgenstein (1969) for a compelling case for the psychological necessity of an anti-sceptical response to the world. Of course, there is a further issue here of whether such 'Humean' psychological attitudes should be counted as genuine beliefs, but I will set this to one side in what follows. A related issue in this regard is the basis on which our anti-sceptical beliefs are formed. Typically, we can point to a specific ground or process that gave rise to a belief, but this doesn't seem to be the case when it comes to anti-sceptical beliefs. It is not as if we believe that we're not BIVs *because* we see that we have two hands, for example. Indeed, Wittgenstein (1969) argues, persuasively to my mind, that some of our most commonsense everyday beliefs are not the result of any specific process or grounds either, such as the belief that (in normal circumstances) we have two hands. In order to keep matters simple I set this issue to one side here. For more on the ramifications of Wittgenstein (1969) for contemporary epistemology, see Pritchard (2005e).
11. Relatedly, we might also offer as supporting evidence that I see him in my office (i.e. in contrast to my seeing *that* he is in my office). Whilst it would be clearly odd to talk of such evidence as being factive, evidence of this sort is clearly in the same category as the factive perceptual evi-

dence just cited in that it employs a ‘success’ term—it is only true that I see him in the office if he really is there. Indeed, although there are important and subtle differences between these two locutions, they will amount to the same thing across a wide range of situations, in that citing as my supporting evidence that I see him in my office will at least (ordinarily) conversationally imply that I see *that* he is in my office, and *vice versa*. Accordingly, although our focus in what follows will be on explicitly factive perceptual evidence, it is worth noting that non-factive perceptual evidence which employs a success term in this way could also be regarded (in a wide range of cases at least) as exemplifying the same features that we are interested in when it comes to factive perceptual evidence.

12. See, for example, McDowell (1994, *passim*).
13. For my own part, I think that Williamson’s (2000b) argument against luminosity counts definitively against the phenomenal conception of evidence, since it shows that our evidence cannot be understood in the way that the internalist invites us to understand it such that we are always in a position to know (by reflection or otherwise) what evidence we have. I discuss and compare the McDowellian and Williamsonian responses to scepticism in Pritchard (2006). See also Pritchard (2003).
14. This line of argument is suggested by a remark made by Williamson (2000b, 181) about a possible evidential contextualism, though he does not have Neta’s view specifically in mind.
15. Interestingly, Neta (2003, fn7) does mention two differences between his view and Williams’, though neither of them fall into the key differences that will be discussed here. For further discussion of the contrast between Williams’ version of contextualism and more mainstream versions, see Pritchard (2002a; 2002b, §5–7).
16. For further discussion of Williams’ denial of epistemological realism—what he refers to at one point as a form of “epistemic deflationism”—see Pritchard (2004).
17. Or, at least, avoid making the denial of closure part of the anti-sceptical strategy on offer. See Williams (1991, 318).
18. See McGinn (1989, *passim*) for discussion of this idea. Indeed, Wittgenstein makes a number of remarks that would seem to support this reading, such as when he writes that “[T]he difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing” (1969, §166).
19. There are also cases in which we appropriately express sentences that express the patently obvious as a kind of conversational ‘gambit’. For example, one might say “It’s hot today”, when this is manifestly true, as a means of getting a conversation started (the English are very good at this, or bad, depending on your point of view). Alternatively, one might assert what is obvious to all participants in a conversational context in order to affirm that one belongs to the group, as when one is amongst other members of the same political party and one says “That man is an idiot” about the leader of the opposing political party who is presently talking on television. For my own part, I am inclined not to regard such utterances as assertions as such, but in any case it is very rare, if ever, that one makes assertions of this sort in a way such that what is asserted is supposed to be playing a supporting role as regards a further proposition, or where making the assertion would imply that one is in a position to offer supporting evidence that is more certain than what is asserted. For more on the assertion of manifest truths, see Williams (2002, chapter 4).
20. I think there are actually a number of problems with claiming to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, so the points raised here are not meant to be at all exhaustive. They are, however, *sufficient* to show that such assertions are improper, and that is all that is needed here. For further discussion of the ramifications for contemporary epistemological discussion of Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty*, see Pritchard (2005c).
21. I actually think that recognising this is to concede far more to the sceptic than is at first apparent, since it limits our ability to take responsibility for our knowledge by asserting it. This, however, is an issue for another time. For further discussion of this point, see Pritchard (2005b, *passim*).

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22. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Bled conference on 'Contextualism' in Slovenia in June 2004. I am grateful to the audience for their perceptive comments, and also to my colleague Alan Millar for discussions on this topic.

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