

NEO-MOOREANISM VERSUS CONTEXTUALISM

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Summary

Attributer contextualism has undoubtedly been the dominant anti-sceptical theory in the recent literature. Nevertheless, this view does face some fairly serious problems, and it is argued that when the contextualist position is compared to a refined version of the much derided ‘Moorean’ response to scepticism, then it becomes clear that there are distinct advantages to being a neo-Moorean rather than a contextualist.

1. Introductory remarks—scepticism and mooreanism

When we teach epistemology to philosophy students for the first time, we tend to begin by introducing them to some form of the sceptical problem in order to grab their attention. The reason why we do this is obvious, since sceptical arguments, when well constructed at any rate, are *paradoxes*—that is, they proceed from apparently uncontentious premises and seemingly flawless reasoning to derive an utterly unacceptable and counterintuitive conclusion. Consider, for example, the following formulation of the sceptical problem, which has become fairly standard in the contemporary literature:

- S1 *S* is unable to know that she’s not, say, a brain-in-a-vat (BIV).
S2 If *S* is unable to know that she’s not a BIV, then she is unable to know that she’s currently seated (and much else besides).

Hence:

- SC *S* is unable to know that she’s currently seated (and much else besides).¹

1. For a survey of the contemporary literature on scepticism which discusses in detail how this formulation of the sceptical problem is central to the recent debate on this topic, see Pritchard (2002c).

This argument is clearly valid. Moreover, both of its premises are highly intuitive. How could I know that I am not a BIV given that this error-possibility is standardly described in such a way that one is unable to tell the difference between one's experience of, say, being seated, and of merely being 'fed' the experience of being seated while in fact being envatted? Furthermore, given the highly plausible closure principle for knowledge—roughly, that if one knows one proposition and knows that it entails a second proposition, then one also knows the second proposition—the second premise ought to be equally unproblematic. Since one cannot, it seems, accept the conclusion, however, the puzzle is complete.

What is interesting for my purposes here is that the initial reaction of most students to this problem is to employ a type of anti-sceptical tactic that is usually associated with G. E. Moore. In essence, what they argue is that *of course* they know that they are presently seated, and from this intuitive 'fact' they then directly infer that the first premise is false and that they do know that they are not BIVs after all. Although this line of argument doesn't quite parallel Moore's (1925; 1939) famous remarks on scepticism, it does share several key features. To begin with, the claim is that one can know the denial of the relevant sceptical hypothesis, despite sceptical claims to the contrary. (Moore famously argued that we can know that there is an external world, thereby claiming to know the denial of the sceptical/idealist hypothesis that there is no such world). Moreover, this is also meant to be a 'commonsense' response to scepticism—and in this sense a *pre-theoretical* response as well—in that the claim is that the sceptic hasn't given us sufficient reasons to worry about whether we have knowledge in order to force us to engage with the problem theoretically. Instead, for all the sceptic has said, we can stick to our commonsense pre-theoretical intuitions and ignore the sceptical challenge with impunity; a very Moorean style of response to scepticism.

Another salient feature of this commonsense line of argument that also mirrors the Moorean line is that it consists of one straightforwardly *claiming* to have the contested knowledge of both 'everyday' propositions—such as that one is seated (or that one has hands)—and also anti-sceptical propositions—such as that one is not a BIV (or that there is an external world)—where the epistemic status of the latter knowledge is dependent upon the former. That the knowledge is claimed in this way indicates that one believes that one has a certain special authority

about the subject matter in question. Moreover, note that the inferential move from everyday to anti-sceptical knowledge indicates that it is not part of this sort of response to scepticism to worry about the second premise of the sceptical argument—and thus to question the closure principle that is typically thought to underpin that premise—since this argument straightforwardly contraposes on the conditional contained within that premise.

Henceforth, we will refer to this commonsense anti-sceptical approach as the ‘Moorean’ line, without concerning ourselves with the further question of just how much this approach has in common with Moore’s stance on scepticism. For our purposes we can let the tag ‘Moorean’ bear a relatively loose affiliation to the relevant work by Moore.²

Of course, most students backtrack from this commonsense line fairly quickly—possibly in response to prompting on our part as lecturers—and move instead towards a more theoretical response to the problem. There are a number of reasons for this, though surveying them all would take us too far afield.³ Instead, I want to focus on two interconnected problems which relate to the dialectical impropriety of this ‘Moorean’ style of argument as it stands.

The first is that the Moorean line merely seems to offer us a *draw* with the sceptic, when what we wanted was a *victory*. Notice that the Moorean response to the sceptical argument is simply a *modus tollens* inference in response to the corresponding *modus ponens* inference employed by the sceptic, where *both* inferences have some intuitive force. The trouble is that since the Moorean response does not offer us any reason to prefer the *modus tollens* inference over the corresponding sceptical *modus ponens* inference—the Moorean does not try to explain away the intuitiveness of the sceptical argument, for example, by, say, offering a further theoretical story to back-up the general anti-sceptical line—it remains that we have no good reason to *not* to be sceptics, and this second-order sceptical conclusion seems almost as bad as its first-order cousin.⁴

The second difficulty is that the Moorean argument seems to be

2. For a useful overview of Moore’s contribution to epistemology, which hints at some differences between his approach to scepticism and the ‘Moorean’ line just described, see Baldwin (1992).

3. I survey the problems facing the Moorean response in detail in the ‘sister’ paper to this article, Pritchard (*forthcoming b*).

4. Indeed, some have argued that it is just as bad. See, for example, Wright (1991).

question-begging, in that it takes as a premise a claim—that one knows a paradigm ‘everyday’ proposition, such as that one is presently seated—which has already been called into question by the sceptical argument, the intuitiveness of which is not itself disputed by the Moorean. Given that the sceptic has offered an intuitive argument which calls this claim into question, however, it seems entirely dialectically inappropriate to cite this claim as a premise in one’s anti-sceptical reasoning.

These two key problems, coupled with the other difficulties that face the Moorean response (the lack of a supporting epistemology to explain how we could know the denials of sceptical hypotheses for example), have ensured that the Moorean response has been quickly regarded by those engaging with scepticism for the first time as simply naïve. It is thus little wonder that the focus of attention soon moves to theoretical responses to the problem which make substantive epistemological claims, such as the kind of response offered by Fred Dretske (1970) and Robert Nozick (1981), who reject the closure principle (and thus the second premise of the sceptical argument).

My interest here, however, is not with the arguments for the rejection of closure,⁵ or any of the other non-contextualist theoretical responses to the sceptical problem that have been presented in the recent literature, but rather with the response to scepticism offered by *attributer contextualism* (henceforth simply ‘contextualism’), a proposal that has been the focus of much of the recent work on scepticism. What I want to argue is that the problems facing this response indicate that we should look again at the Moorean treatment of scepticism. As we will see, the Moorean thesis, properly refined, has the resources within it to avoid some of the core problems facing contextualism, and is thus at a dialectical advantage relative to this view. Moreover, the Moorean can learn from the contextualist and exploit certain features of the contextualist position for her own ends.

2. *Contextualism and scepticism*

Let us suppose, then, that closure is beyond reproach and that we have already considered the Moorean response to scepticism and found it

5. I have already discussed the arguments for non-closure at length elsewhere. See Pritchard (2002a; 2002b; 2005b, chapters 2, 3 & 6).

wanting. In such circumstances, it is easy to see the appeal of contextualism. In essence, this view holds that ‘knows’ is a context-sensitive term such 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. Contextualists are therefore able to claim that while assertions of ascription sentences in everyday conversational contexts (henceforth simply ‘contexts’) where the epistemic standards are undemanding are generally true, in sceptical 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, contextualists can hold that while it can be true to say of us from the perspective of an everyday 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 context (and where all that has changed is the context) that we do *not* know that we are currently seated. Furthermore, since 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 contextualists, like Mooreans, reject the first premise that we are unable to know anti-sceptical propositions of this sort.

This view—advanced by such figures as Keith DeRose (1995), David Lewis (1996), and Stewart Cohen (2000)—is attractive precisely because it accommodates the fact, so harmful to the Moorean response, that we find both the sceptic’s *modus ponens* argument *and* the corresponding *modus tollens* argument put forward by the Moorean compelling. These apparently irreconcilable facts about our epistemic intuitions in this regard can be made consistent with one another within the contextualist framework, since now there is a context in which the premises and the conclusions of the sceptical argument are all true, and also a context in which the premises and the conclusion of the Moorean argument are all true. We thus do not have to choose between two equally opposed sets of intuitions and thereby face the sceptical threat at second-order. Instead, we can simply explain away the problem of scepticism.

There are problems with the view, however, three of which are particularly salient for our purposes. To begin with, note that the contex-

tualist treatment of scepticism is an essentially concessive one, in that it grants that there is a context in which what the sceptic claims is true and that this context is one in which more demanding epistemic standards are in play. The problem with this concession is that it raises the worry that perhaps it is the sceptic who is using the exacting epistemic standards, with the epistemic standards in play in everyday contexts reflecting merely an epistemic ‘looseness’ on our part. That is, the contextualist line prompts the thought that perhaps, *strictly speaking*, the sceptic is right after all, it is just that relative to the comparatively undemanding epistemic standards in play in everyday conversational contexts where we don’t concern ourselves with the austere epistemic requirements made by the sceptic we have a practice—useful, if not strictly correct—of treating ourselves as knowers. If there were a way of dealing with the problem without making the sort of concession that leads to this worry then this would naturally be preferable. Mooreanism is, of course, just such a view that doesn’t make a concession to the sceptic of this sort.⁶

The second problem is that contextualists make *two* revisionistic claims, even though one of these claims alone would seem to suffice to deal with the sceptical problem. Clearly, the main revisionistic aspect of contextualism is the contextualist thesis itself, which revises our natural non-contextualist (‘invariantist’) understanding of ‘knows’. The second revisionary aspect of the contextualist thesis is a by-product of the contextualist retention of closure, and this is the rejection of the first premise of the sceptical argument by allowing that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses after all (albeit only in undemanding contexts). The problem is, however, that if we can make sense of the denial of this premise then it is far from clear that we need to be contextualists, since the denial of this premise *all by itself* would suffice to block the sceptical argument. It is thus only if the denial of this premise is essentially connected to the wider contextualist thesis that this feature of the contextualist line does not undermine the general

6. In effect, the problem here is that contextualism seems to tempt one towards an infallibilist conception of knowledge, as defended, for example, by Unger (1971; 1975). Interestingly, in more recent work Unger (1984) has been more sympathetic to contextualism, though he maintains that there is no way of deciding between a context-sensitive understanding of ‘knows’ which limits the concession to scepticism, and an infallibilist treatment, which does not. As noted above, such second-order scepticism is at least *almost* as bad as its first-order cousin.

approach, and this is far from clear.⁷ Notice, however, that Mooreanism is precisely the sort of view that only makes the one revisionistic claim in this respect of denying the sceptic's first premise.

The third problem for contextualism which is salient for our purposes is that the linguistic evidence for the view seems at best inconclusive. We have already noted that there is an intuitive resistance to treating 'knows' as a context-sensitive term. More seriously for the contextualist, however, is the fact that the apparent context-sensitivity that contextualists appeal to in order to motivate their view seems to be explicable in terms of a very different view which continues to treat 'knows' as an invariant term while offering a more nuanced account of the *assertibility* of sentences involving this term. In this way, one can account for why it might seem appropriate to assert a sentence involving this term in one context and yet also inappropriate to assert that same sentence in another context (even though all that has changed has been the context), without having to appeal to the context-sensitivity of 'knows'. Indeed, one could simply treat both assertions as true (or both false for that matter). Moreover, since there is very little that is counterintuitive about the suggestion that it is sometimes inappropriate to assert a sentence which is literally true, this appeal to the context-sensitivity of the propriety of assertions seems to be a more natural way of accommodating apparent context-sensitivity than any appeal to the context-sensitivity of the terms involved. Clearly, such a view would be welcomed by the Moorean since it would enable the proponent of this position to explain away the apparent context-sensitivity of knowledge—and thereby also some of our sceptical intuitions—without conceding that 'knows' is a context-sensitive term (or conceding anything substantive to the sceptic for that matter).

Although there are other problems with the contextualist thesis,⁸ what these three difficulties point to, as we will see, is a principled ground on which one could resurrect the Moorean anti-sceptical thesis in opposition to its contextualist counterpart. We have already outlined what such a *neo*-Moorean view might look like—one that shared the basic features

7. There is a related problem in this regard which is the odd status of one's knowledge of the denials of anti-sceptical propositions on the contextualist view. After all, one cannot truthfully say of oneself that one has this knowledge, since to do so would be to move to a sceptical conversational context in which what is said is now no longer true. Such knowledge is thus forever tacit, at least as far as self-ascription of knowledge goes.

8. I raise a further problem for the view in Pritchard (2001), for example.

of Mooreanism but offered instead a more theoretical response to the sceptic, and which allied itself to a thesis about the context-sensitivity of the assertibility conditions for ascription sentences. We will now consider what this view will involve in more detail.

§3. *Basic neo-mooreanism*

We noted above that the chief problems relating to the Moorean position related to its dialectical impropriety. One way in which the neo-Moorean view might begin to deal with this problem is by incorporating the kind of view just described which accepts that there is something context-sensitive about the propriety of assertions of ascription sentences but which accounts for that context-sensitivity in an anti-sceptical fashion by treating the problematic assertions of ascription sentences in sceptical contexts as being merely improper, rather than also false (as the contextualist claims). On this view, insofar as an agent has knowledge of a proposition then the assertion of an ascription sentence which ascribes that knowledge to the agent will be true in all contexts (just so long as all non-conversational factors remain constant), even though in some contexts, such as in sceptical contexts, this assertion may well be inappropriate.

I specify one way in which this line of argument might run in Pritchard (2005*a*), where the view is spelt-out along Gricean lines such that the conversational implicatures generated by the assertion of an ascription sentence fluctuate in response to contextual factors such that the very same (true) assertion will in one context generate true conversational implicatures (and so be appropriate) while generating false conversational implicatures (and so be inappropriate) in another.

For example, it is commonly agreed that in making an assertion—especially one which ascribes knowledge—one thereby represents oneself as possessing adequate relevant evidence to back-up that assertion. Crucially, however, whether or not one's evidence does count as 'relevant' or 'adequate' will be a context-sensitive matter, in that it will depend on the presuppositions of the context in which the assertion is made. Accordingly, two otherwise identical agents who are in exactly the same evidential state could make the same assertion and yet the one assertion be appropriate and the other inappropriate because of the differing truth-values of the conversational implicatures regarding the

agent's evidential position that are generated by these assertions in the different contexts. For instance, it may be—and I will say more about this below—that in sceptical contexts there are constraints in operation which restrict what might count as relevant or adequate evidence that are not in operation in normal contexts. Notice, however, that the claim here is not that one's evidential state can depend on purely contextual factors—which would result in a kind of contextualist thesis—but rather that the sort of conversational implicatures concerning one's evidential state that are generated by an assertion can fluctuate with context.

Other ways of spelling-out the details of a view of this sort are available, of course, and a position of this kind can be supplemented in all sorts of ways, though this is an issue that is best explored elsewhere.⁹ What is important for our purposes is that adding this further thesis to the basic Moorean line will inevitably lead to a fundamental change in the view, over and above the obvious immediate change to the basic Moorean stance by allying it to a theoretical claim about assertions of ascription sentences. This is that any account of the assertion of ascription sentences of this sort will have the result that it won't be appropriate for the Moorean to simply assert her anti-scepticism in response to the sceptical argument. Instead, such assertions on this view will be deemed inappropriate, even if they are in fact true.

Although this amendment to the Moorean line is a concession of sorts to both the sceptic and the contextualist—in that it allows that there is something improper about making 'Moorean' assertions—the concession is squarely in the spirit of the Moorean approach to scepticism. After all, it is intuitive that there is something amiss about the Moorean assertions, and thus any commonsense treatment of scepticism ought to be able to do justice to this thought. Moreover, by making this concession the Moorean is able to strip both scepticism and contextualism of a great deal of their plausibility, since part of the attraction of these views is precisely the impropriety of Moorean-style anti-sceptical assertions, whereas the neo-Moorean line under consideration here accounts for this fact without thereby conceding that what is asserted is false.

With this addition to the Moorean thesis in play, the neo-Moorean can start to deal with the problem of dialectical impropriety facing the

9. For a useful exchange on this topic, see Brown (2005) and Black (2005). For the main defence of the contextualist line in this regard, see DeRose (2002).

Moorean view. For notice that if the neo-Moorean does not claim to be able to properly make her anti-sceptical assertions then this will go some way to diminishing the counterintuitiveness of the position in this regard. It is no wonder that Mooreanism seems dialectically inappropriate if the assertions made by the Moorean are entered in a context in which such assertions are conversationally inappropriate, even if true. Disentangling the Moorean line from the distinctive assertions made by the Moorean can thus go some way to evading the charge of dialectical impropriety.

In order to make further headway in this direction, however, it is going to be essential to say something about how it is that we are able to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses as Mooreans claim, since without this further story we will still be left with the other aspect of the dialectical impropriety charge, which is that Mooreanism simply leaves us with a second-order scepticism which is almost as problematic as its first-order cousin. Only with this further theoretical story in hand will it be possible for the Moorean to motivate the denial of this premise over the sceptic's endorsement of it. Usefully for our purposes, however, the resources needed by the Moorean to make this move can be found in the contextualist's own treatment of this premise.

As we noted above, contextualists also deny this premise, albeit only in undemanding everyday contexts where the epistemic standards are low. They tend to do this by appealing to some form of 'safety' principle—see, for example, DeRose (1995)—which demands that one's belief in the target proposition 'matches' the truth in near-by possible worlds such that, where the proposition is believed it is true and where it is not true it is not believed. Only near-by possible worlds are relevant in everyday contexts because the epistemic standards are so low. Relative to near-by possible worlds, however, it *is* possible for one's belief that, say, one is not a BIV, to match the truth in this way. After all, provided that the actual world is much as we take it to be, then this proposition will be true in all near-by possible worlds and, presumably, one will believe it in all near-by possible worlds. Such a safety-based approach thus rescues our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses in everyday contexts where the epistemic standards are low.

In general, safety principles of this sort have been advanced by a number of figures—most notably Ernest Sosa (1999), but also myself (see Pritchard (2002*d*))—with the rationale behind their adoption being that they capture a sense in which one's knowledge is non-lucky in that

it involves the possession of a true belief that could not have easily been false. Interestingly, for contextualists it must be the case that at least *sometimes* it is sufficient for knowledge that one's belief is merely safe, since otherwise the contextualist would not be able to account for our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses (we don't obviously meet any other epistemic condition, such as an internalist justification condition, when it comes to these propositions). If this is right, however, then it ought to be possible for the neo-Moorean to make use of this principle to account for how we might have knowledge of these propositions in a context-insensitive way. The guiding thought behind the adoption of this account of what knowledge fundamentally consists in will be that knowledge is *always* an undemanding concept such that we *never* need to meet the austere epistemic standards that are demanded by the sceptic in all contexts and demanded by the contextualist in sceptical contexts.¹⁰

Notice that the adoption of something like the safety principle in order to account for our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses commits both contextualism and neo-Mooreanism to an externalist epistemology. After all, what is central to the externalist position is that it allows that agents can have knowledge, at least in some cases, without having to meet any kind of internalist epistemic condition, such as an internalist justification condition, where what makes the condition internalist is that the relevant justifying facts are reflectively accessible to the agent concerned. Although there is of course a great deal of room for manoeuvre concerning exactly how one understands this internalist requirement, it ought to be clear that our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses on the safety-based view won't meet this requirement on any plausible rendering since, *ex hypothesi*, the agent concerned will have *no* good reflectively accessible grounds for thinking that she is not a BIV, and so can't plausibly be thought to have met *any* internalist epistemic condition.

10. Black (2002) argues for a neo-Moorean view which makes use of the 'sensitivity' principle, a principle which 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 (2005*b*, 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.

Since both contextualists and neo-Mooreans are committed to externalism here, however, any problems facing the safety-based externalist view will be problems for both camps, and so will not decide the issue of whether we should be neo-Mooreans or contextualists.¹¹ With this supporting epistemology in place—moreover, a supporting epistemology which, in outline at least, could not be objectionable by contextualist lights since it borrows its essentials from the contextualist account—we have the beginnings of a story of how one might legitimate the Moorean rejection of the sceptic’s first premise over the sceptic’s endorsement of that premise, thereby evading the problem of second-order scepticism left us by the basic Moorean line. After all, there is now an account of knowledge on the table—one that draws on the widespread intuition that knowledge is non-lucky true belief—which can account for our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses.¹²

Furthermore, notice that this supporting epistemology complements the other neo-Moorean thesis just offered concerning the context-sensitivity of the assertibility conditions of ascription sentences, since there is now a further *prima facie* explanation of why Moorean assertions can seem false even though, as this account shows, they are in fact true (provided the relevant external conditions obtain at any rate). After all, we would not normally regard a claim to know as being appropriate if

11. DeRose (1995) and Lewis (1996) are explicit in their endorsement of externalism. In contrast, Cohen tries to consistently maintain an internalist construal of the contextualist thesis. In doing so, however, he gets into a number of fairly fundamental problems, as he himself recognises. See especially, Cohen (2000).

12. 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, this approach raises the further question 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 which 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 (2003; 2005*e*).

the agent concerned was unable to back-up that assertion with appropriate grounds (grounds which must thus be reflectively accessible). If externalism about knowledge is right, however, then the fact that one is unable to offer adequate *reflectively accessible* grounds in support of one's belief that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis will not decide the matter of whether or not one has knowledge of this proposition, even though it does decide the matter of whether or not one can properly claim to know this proposition. The contextualist move from the unassertability of a claim to know in this regard to its falsity is thus premature given the prior commitment to an externalist theory of knowledge.

We have, then, the beginnings of a neo-Moorean account, one that can deal with the main difficulties facing the Moorean view. Moreover, since the neo-Moorean account draws on key features of the contextualist position in such a way as to also avoid some of the main problems facing contextualism, it follows that we have here an anti-sceptical view with distinct dialectical advantages over its contextualist counterpart. As we will see in the next section, however, this neo-Moorean story does need to be complicated in order to fully deal with the sceptical problem. Nevertheless, these complications do not undermine the dialectical advantage that neo-Mooreanism enjoys relative to contextualism.

4. *Contextualism, evidence, and neo-mooreanism*

The need to complicate the neo-Moorean story arises because the sceptical argument as it is outlined above does not really capture the underlying form of the problem, which is the evidential lack that the sceptical argument implicitly turns upon. The trouble is, any response to the non-evidential formulation of the sceptical argument is not thereby a response to the evidential formulation. Note, however, that since most anti-sceptical responses in the contemporary literature—including contextualism—are focused upon the non-evidential formulation of the sceptical challenge, this is a problem for *all* the participants in this debate, and not just a problem for the neo-Moorean.

Consider the following formulation of the sceptical argument which focuses on the evidential basis of our knowledge:

S1' *S*'s evidence cannot favour her belief that she is seated (and much else besides) over the (known to be incompatible) sceptical hypothesis that, say, she is a BIV.

S2' If *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, then *S* is unable to know that she is currently seated (and much else besides).

Hence:

SC' *S* is unable to know that she is currently seated (and much else besides).

Note 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 evidence which favours the target proposition over known to be incompatible alternatives, then one is unable to know the target proposition.¹³ Of course, so stated—without qualification—this principle may seem quite controversial, since there are a number of propositions which might plausibly be thought to be known even while lacking adequate evidential support. Notice, however, that this class of 'ungrounded' knowledge is bound to be small, since it is hardly plausible that *most* of our knowledge is ungrounded in this way. If this is right, then it does not matter for our purposes that underdetermination does not hold unrestrictedly since so long as it holds for most empirical propositions that will suffice to get the sceptical argument up-and-running (the sceptic only needs to call into question the epistemic status of a wide class of propositions which we believe in order to wreak the necessary intellectual havoc). So understood, however, this principle seems to be beyond reproach. After all, it would hardly be an intellectually satisfying response to the problem of scepticism to argue that one could have adequate evidential support for those beliefs which require such support even when the evidence in question

13. 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.

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 which favours our everyday beliefs over (known to be incompatible) sceptical alternatives, because, *ex hypothesi*, the sceptical alternatives are phenomenologically indistinguishable from everyday scenarios. Indeed, it is just an evidential intuition of this sort that guided the first premise of the non-evidential formulation of the sceptical argument outlined above.

The problem is that neither the contextualist nor the neo-Moorean anti-sceptical strategy seems to contain within it any thesis that could be usefully brought to bear on this argument, since neither approach deals with the issue of the evidential basis of scepticism. The challenge facing both the neo-Moorean and the contextualist is thus to extend their anti-sceptical views such that they can offer some way of dealing with this argument, and this is going to mean opting for one of the following horns of a dilemma. Either they must (i) show 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 (ii) show that adequate evidential support for our beliefs in everyday propositions is consistent with an inability to rule-out the incompatible sceptical alternatives.¹⁴

Although most contextualists have ignored this formulation of the sceptical problem, there is one contextualist account in the literature that explicitly focuses on evidential scepticism, which is due to Ram Neta (2002; 2003).¹⁵ Essentially, Neta’s ingenious idea is that we need a contextualist account of knowledge because knowledge entails evidential support and the notion of evidence must be understood in a contextualist manner. The contextualist treatment of knowledge thus falls out of the contextualist treatment of evidence, where the latter deals directly with the evidential formulation of the sceptical problem. In particular,

14. For a sustained discussion of the relationship between the closure-based sceptical argument and the ‘evidential’ sceptical argument just formulated, see Pritchard (2005*d*).

15. Cohen (e.g., 2000) is also sensitive to the underlying evidential problem facing contextualist treatments of scepticism, though even by his own lights the approach he adopts in this regard—which essentially opts for the second horn of the dilemma just proposed—is not that compelling.

the claim is that the *extent* of one's evidence varies from context to context, such that one might have very strong evidence in one context and yet very weak evidence in another, even though all that has changed has been the context. In this way, Neta argues that we can account for why the evidence we cite in favour of our perceptual beliefs in normal contexts is sufficient to favour those beliefs over sceptical alternatives, even though this is not the case in sceptical contexts.

Neta's approach to the problem of evidential scepticism thus opts for the first horn of the dilemma proposed above, in that he tries to account for how, at least in everyday contexts, our beliefs in everyday propositions could be regarded as supported by evidence which favours these beliefs over sceptical alternatives. Neta motivates this claim by noting that in such contexts we have a practice of allowing *factive* evidence—i.e., evidence which entails what it is evidence for. This is certainly true. If asked, for example, how I know that my colleague is at work today (perhaps by my head of department, who is speaking to me on the telephone), I might naturally say that I know this because I can *see that* he is here—where *seeing that* something is the case entails that it is the case. In general, Neta's ingenious idea is that in normal contexts we do not restrict what counts as evidence to the purely phenomenal—that is, we do not restrict it to what merely *seems* to be the case, which is clearly not factive—and this allows factive evidence to be available. If this is right, then in everyday contexts one *can* possess evidence which favours one's everyday beliefs over sceptical alternatives, since factive evidence in favour of one's belief that, say, one was presently seated (that one could see that one was presently seated, for example), would be evidence which favoured this everyday belief over a sceptical alternative, such as the BIV hypothesis.

The contextualist element to Neta's proposal comes in via his concession that in sceptical contexts what counts as evidence becomes restricted in such a way that one's perceptual evidence does not extend beyond the purely phenomenal. Accordingly, in sceptical contexts the evidential sceptical argument will go through, since one's evidence will not favour one's everyday beliefs over sceptical alternatives, and thus one will lack knowledge of both everyday and anti-sceptical propositions. We thus get a proposal which mirrors the general contextualist line on knowledge, most notably in that it poses no problem for closure, since we either know both everyday and anti-sceptical propositions or we know neither of them.

The most contentious aspect of Neta's proposal is, of course, his claim that in everyday contexts we can have evidence which favours our everyday beliefs over sceptical alternatives. As Neta notes, however, this feature of the proposal does have some independent support from other quarters. A number of philosophers—among them John McDowell (e.g., 1982, *passim*) and Timothy Williamson (e.g., 2000)—have noted that the standard arguments that are usually cited in favour of treating evidence as purely phenomenal are actually quite suspect. In essence, the source of their complaint with the phenomenal conception of evidence is that it 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, however, why those generally impressed by epistemic externalism—contextualists and neo-Mooreans alike—should be persuaded by a line of argument of this sort. Why should what is phenomenally available to the subject in reflection determine what counts as one's evidence? More precisely, why shouldn't the externalist allow that the nature of one's evidence is determined by facts that extend beyond the realm of what is reflectively accessible to the subject? Indeed, if the externalist offered a 'reflective access' requirement on the facts that determine one's evidence, then it would be puzzling why he didn't also incorporate such a requirement into his account of other epistemic notions like knowledge and justification. The phenomenal conception of evidence, while plausible by internalist lights, is thus highly contentious by externalist ones.¹⁶

We thus have good grounds to agree with Neta that the necessary evidential support is in principle available for our everyday beliefs. The problem for Neta's account, however, is that if we can indeed make sense of the idea of there being the necessary 'favouring' evidence for our everyday beliefs, then it is far from clear why we need to also endorse any form of contextualism. That is, since this thesis alone will suffice to meet the evidential problem, what would be the advantage of endorsing a contextualist thesis on top of this claim? Indeed, it seems

16. 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. See, for example, McDowell (1994, *passim*).

that the neo-Moorean can exploit the resources brought to bear on this problem by Neta without joining him in endorsing contextualism, since the principled denial of the first premise of the evidential sceptical argument is just what the neo-Moorean is looking for in order to respond to this sceptical problem in a broadly Moorean fashion. Note that this move on the part of the neo-Moorean mirrors that made earlier by the neo-Moorean as regards the standard contextualist view, in that the claim is that since neo-Mooreanism is here only making one potentially counterintuitive claim—as opposed to the contextualist’s *two* potentially counterintuitive claims—so neo-Mooreanism is at a dialectical advantage relative to contextualism.

Moreover, an ‘evidential’ neo-Mooreanism of this sort would also avoid another key problem which faces Neta’s evidential contextualism. For what is troubling about such a view, like its non-evidentialist contextualist counterpart, 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 generates the tempting—and scepticism-friendly—thought 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 evidence, 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. Clearly the alternative neo-Moorean view in this respect does not face this problem, and so is again at a dialectical advantage relative to its contextualist counterpart.¹⁷

17. There is also a further problem for this view. The interesting case for the contextualist

The response from the evidential contextualist to this line of argument will undoubtedly be to claim that neo-Mooreanism is unable to offer anything in the way of diagnosis when it comes to the problem of scepticism—it cannot, for example, explain why we find scepticism so intuitive. Notice, however, that the account of the context-sensitivity of the propriety conditions for knowledge ascriptions outlined above which we allied to neo-Mooreanism can be brought forward to deal with this issue. As stated above, this line of argument explained the apparent falsehood of certain assertions—like claims to know in sceptical contexts—in terms of how such assertions in these contexts generate false conversational implicatures about the agent’s evidential position. If this is right, then the appeal of scepticism—in both its standard and evidential guises—can be straightforwardly explained, since it arises out of a failure to recognise that the unassertability of these assertions is not a good indication of their falsity, since they would still be unassertable even if true.

Indeed, notice that the contextualist account offered by Neta can be exploited by the neo-Moorean in this regard. Neta’s idea is that there is something about the raising of sceptical error-possibilities that restricts what counts as evidence, such that in sceptical contexts where

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’, while 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 epistemically 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? This line of argument is suggested by a remark made by Williamson (2000, 181) about a possible evidential contextualism, though he does not have Neta’s view specifically in mind.

these error-possibilities are at issue one's evidence does not extend beyond the phenomenal. In essence, the idea is that one's evidence is restricted to what evidence one would have if the error-possibilities under discussion were to obtain. If a sceptical error-possibility—like the BIV hypothesis—were to obtain, then clearly one's evidence would not extend beyond the phenomenal because it would bear next to no correlation with events in the world. Thus, one's evidence is for this reason restricted to the phenomenal in sceptical contexts.

This sort of restriction on what counts as evidence is more naturally thought of, however, as a restriction on what can be legitimately cited as evidence in that context, where the latter has no immediate contextualist ramifications. That is, it is more natural to suppose that what we can legitimately cite as evidence is context-sensitive rather than the stronger claim that evidence itself is context-sensitive, especially if one has already signed up to an externalist epistemology. After all, if one were in a dialectical exchange with a sceptic where sceptical error-possibilities are at issue it does not seem all that counterintuitive to concede that it would not be legitimate to cite factive—and thus non-phenomenal—reasons in favour of one's beliefs, since this would clearly be to fail to co-operate with the sceptic in this context. Moreover, as we noted above, when we talk of the evidence that one needs to legitimate an assertion we are clearly talking of reflectively accessible evidence—evidence that one can cite. In this context, however, a claim to know will generate the conversational implicature that one has evidence to back-up this assertion which excludes sceptical possibilities, and one does not have reflectively accessible evidence of *this* sort. Accordingly, this assertion—which is, note, a Moorean (but not a neo-Moorean) assertion—will be illegitimate since it will generate false conversational implicatures. Nevertheless, this does not mean that what is asserted is thereby false—which is what Neta is obliged to say—since for the externalist one's evidence is not determined by what is reflectively accessible to one; still less is it determined by incidental features about the context in which one claims to possess that knowledge.

Pulling the various threads of the neo-Moorean position together thus enables us to offer a diagnosis of why the Moorean assertions are so problematic—both dialectically and conversationally—since they purport to engage with the sceptic in the sceptical context, even though any engagement of this sort is bound to result in false conversational implicatures being generated. Note, however, that this diagnosis of the

attraction of scepticism does not concede anything of substance to the sceptic, since it still remains the case that the sceptic has given us no reason for thinking that what the Moorean says is false.¹⁸

5. *Concluding remarks*

Of course, there is much more that could be usefully said to re-enforce the neo-Moorean stance. It would be helpful, for example, if one could motivate neo-Mooreanism not just in relation to contextualism, but also in relation to other anti-sceptical theories, like the arguments for non-closure offered by Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981), or the new contrastivist proposal put forward by Jonathan Schaffer (2005).¹⁹ Moreover, one would like to see a more positive and nuanced account of how the neo-Moorean can employ a non-phenomenal account of evidence.²⁰ It would, however, take me too far afield to make further headway in this direction here. Instead, I will simply flag one issue which I think the neo-Moorean would be wise to explore in more depth.

This issue concerns whether allowing that we are unable to properly argue head-on with the sceptic by making anti-sceptical assertions doesn't concede something substantial to the sceptic after all. By this I don't mean to withdraw or qualify any of the claims made above, but rather to draw attention to the fact that perhaps the problem of scepticism is not exhausted by the two forms of sceptical argument that we have discussed here. Accordingly, while it might be true that the neo-Moorean can offer a fairly straightforward response to these two forms of scepticism, there may be other versions of the sceptical challenge that are not so simply dealt with. The additional sceptical problem that I have in mind here is the Pyrrhonian sceptical challenge of antiquity, since what is distinctive of this form of scepticism is its focus on legitimate assertion rather than on knowledge possession *per se*, such that the mark of the knowing agent was specifically an ability to assert what was known without fear of having that assertion conversationally undermined. If this gets the essentials of the Pyrrhonian

18. I discuss Neta's view at more length in Pritchard (2004).

19. I explicitly discuss how the neo-Moorean should respond to arguments for non-closure in a number of places. See, especially, Pritchard (2005*b*, chapters 2 & 3). I respond to contrastivism in Pritchard (*forthcoming a*).

20. I expand on this issue in Pritchard (*forthcoming b*).

sceptical challenge right, and if such a challenge is to be regarded as posing a serious problem, then the concession made by the Moorean that we are unable to properly make certain assertions may be more troubling than is at first apparent.²¹

It should also be noted, however, that even if neo-Mooreanism does turn out to be seriously troubled by the Pyrrhonian challenge, so understood, that offers no real comfort to the contextualist. This is because the contextualist is in an even worse position in this respect, since not only can the knowledge not be properly claimed, it isn't even *possessed* in sceptical contexts! Yet again, then, we have seen that neo-Mooreanism is at a dialectical advantage relative to contextualism.²²

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21. For further discussion of this point, see Pritchard (2005*b*, chapter 8). I discuss a related point in Pritchard (2005*c*).

22. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on 'Contextualism' at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in October 2004. I am grateful to the audience on this occasion for their perceptive comments, with special thanks to my commentator, Finn Spicer, and to the organiser of this conference, Martijn Blaauw. Versions of this paper have also been presented in Bled (Slovenia), the University of York, and the University of Birmingham.

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