

**ACCOMMODATING THE SKEPTIC:
A FRESH READING OF CONTEXTUALISM**

By Sergiu Spătan

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Philosophy

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Supervisor: Professor Howard Robinson

Budapest, Hungary, 2014

Abstract

Epistemic contextualism is one of the most intriguing epistemological theories that exist on the market today. Conceived as a linguistic thesis – according to which knowledge sentences of the form ‘*S* knows that *p*’ change their truth conditions and, respectively, their truth values, in connection to the context in which they are uttered – epistemic contextualism has received a great deal of criticism for the peculiar way it deals with the skeptic. The main objection is that epistemic contextualism does not have the tools for a proper solution to the skeptical puzzle. In this thesis, I want to defend contextualism against this sort of objection, by arguing that, in fact, the lack of proper resources against the skeptic is only apparent, and it is due to a mistaken reading of the theory, a reading that isolates contextualism from a more straightforward approach. I believe that a fresh reading of the theory can show that contextualism has the capabilities to answer the skeptic even on its own ground. An essential part of this fresh reading is what I call ‘proto-knowledge’. My main claim is that proto-knowledge can help us understand better the presuppositions used by contextualism in its dealings with the skeptic; and therefore, to understand better the way contextualism accommodates skepticism.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Professor Katalin Farkas for her rigorous introduction to the problem of skepticism, and for her helpful comments on earlier drafts of this thesis. My special regards go to my supervisor, Professor Howard Robinson, for having patience with my quests in this field, and for the useful debates we had concerning these topics. I am also grateful to Professors Ernest Sosa and Nenad Miscevic, for discussing on different occasions the ideas contained in this thesis, to my colleagues with which I engaged in endless debates, and to all the people to whom I had the opportunity to present my questions and ideas concerning skepticism and contextualism.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1. – A Reading of Contextualism.....	7
1.1. Skepticism.....	7
1.2. Bare contextualism.....	10
1.3. Contextualist theories.....	14
Chapter 2. – Problems With the Skeptic.....	20
2.1. EC is only metalinguistic.....	21
2.2. EC and High-Standards.....	25
Chapter 3. – A Fresh Reading of Contextualism.....	33
3.1. Gradualism.....	33
3.2. Knowledge and proto-knowledge.....	36
3.3. The consequences.....	42
Chapter 4. – Accommodating the Skeptic.....	46
4.1. Can we generalize?.....	46
4.2. Solving the skeptical puzzle.....	51
4.3. Objections.....	56
Concluding Remark.....	60
References.....	62

Introduction

There is something Mephistophellian about skepticism;¹ a persistent feeling that something mysterious, for a long time concealed, is ready at any moment to swallow and devour our peaceful steadiness. How could we know, the skeptical argument goes, that what we believe to be true is not actually an illusion, a sophisticated lie created precisely for our deceiving? How could we know that we are not brains in vats, butterflies dreaming to be humans, or videogames living in a Matrix? Descartes himself chose to let an evil demon (!), of the ‘utmost power and cunning’, play the central deceiving role in his skeptical scenario. The question is why? Why do we call skepticism ‘evil’ and try to escape it? Why do we feel so unsettled in its presence and try to avoid it? Why is skepticism so arousing, so wickedly puzzling?

According to one possible interpretation, skepticism is so threatening simply because of what it says. The main claim of global skepticism is that we have no knowledge of the external world – given that we cannot refute, from our epistemic standpoint, any of the well-crafted skeptical scenarios (that may include brains in vats, a Matrix, or an evil demon). This is, of course, unsettling because it brings about a lot of insecurity, a ‘fear of the unknown’. While we get aroused by the possibility of an intricate skeptical conspiracy plan, we also get scared by the fact that we can lose the power conferred by our alleged knowledge, if that plan is true.

According to a second possible interpretation, skepticism is even more threatening for what it implies. Indeed, skepticism seems to suggest not only that there is no knowledge of the external world, but also that there are no epistemic differences between any of our beliefs. (How could there be? If all beliefs are non-knowledge, then no belief is epistemically better

¹ In this thesis I will discuss only global skepticism – in contrast with local types of skepticism (e.g. dream skepticism). For the ease of exposition, therefore, I will simply use ‘skepticism’ to denote global skepticism.

than the other: none is superior at the tribunal of knowledge.) As Simon Blackburn puts it, “while ancient skepticism was the sworn opponent of dogmatism, today dogmatism feeds and flourishes on the desecrated corpse of reason: astrology, prophecy, homeopathy, Feng shui, conspiracy theories, flying saucers, voodoo, crystal balls, miracle-working, angel visits, alien abductions [etc.]” (2005, xiv). Contemporary skepticism, it seems, leads us not to suspension of reason – *epoché* – or tranquility of the mind – *ataraxia* – but to a certain state of dogmatic relativism, a state in which ‘everything goes’ (*Ibidem*).

It is my contention in this thesis that the second effect is the worst of the two. Even if realizing that there is no real knowledge to be gained in the world is quite intimidating, if not scary, the further recognition that this entails absolute relativism, is, it seems to me, even more daunting. As Korblyth claims (2000, 27): “Surely what is so disturbing about the skeptical argument is [the] suggestion that there is no more reason to believe any proposition about the external world than any other.”

But if this is the case, then, if we are to give a non-skeptical answer to the skeptic (as I assume we all want), we should focus on eliminating or reducing at least this relativistic implication of skepticism, if we cannot refute skepticism altogether. And, indeed, my second contention in this thesis is that, unfortunately, we cannot refute it. Skepticism is too strong of a position to be refuted so easily. Maybe we will have the capacities in the future to gain irrefutable warrants for our beliefs. For the moment, nevertheless, it seems to me that skepticism cannot be attacked directly;² the only way that we can deal with it is by reducing

² This is, of course, a controversial claim. Nonetheless, it is not my purpose to explore in this thesis the details of why I believe refuting skepticism to be such a far-fetched possibility. Here I will just mention, following some of the main trends in epistemology, that any direct argument against skepticism is either stubborn – simply taking as a premise the refutation of the skeptical argument (‘one’s modus ponens is another’s modus tollens’, as they say) – or it commits itself to even more unwelcomed results – rejecting what seem to be very intuitive epistemic principles (see Pritchard 2002). I will come back to this – although I will not discuss the details – in the first chapter, when I review possible solutions to the skeptical argument.

its negative influence, of which dogmatic relativism is probably the worst. Instead of trying in vain to refute skepticism, I claim, we should better accommodate it, by accepting its strength, and by denying its troublesome consequences.

Luckily enough, there is a theory that can do precisely that: Epistemic Contextualism (henceforth EC).³ According to EC – for which the word ‘knowledge’ is context-sensitive – the skeptic is both right and wrong in denying knowledge: knowledge claims are rendered both true in ordinary contexts and false in skeptical ones. But if this is the case, then EC both accepts – conditionally – skepticism, and it denies that this entails relativism – given that it recognizes the epistemic differences between beliefs. Therefore, EC acknowledges the strength of the skeptic perspective, but it denies that it should have such a daunting effect on us. In other words, EC accommodates skepticism, without committing itself to an unwelcomed relativism.

Contextualism, nevertheless, has received a great deal of criticism, varying from the claim that ‘knowledge’ is not actually a context-sensitive term (Stanley 2005), to the objection that it entails a kind of modern pyrrhonism (Fogelin 1999), or that it presupposes a mistaken error theory (Schiffer 1996). The worst, still, is that EC, in fact, does not help us solving the skeptical problem. It is, the critics claim, too weak of a theory in order to really count in the dispute with the skeptic (Sosa 2000, Klein 2000, Feldman 1999, 2001, Bach 2005 etc.).

My aim in this thesis is to respond to this last group of objections, and to show that the greatest advantage of contextualism is precisely the fact that, instead of attempting to refute skepticism directly, it accommodates it. My claim is that, although contextualist theorists are doing very well in defending the theory against such objections, they do not fully use the tools provided by contextualism, and therefore they do not quiet the opposed intuitions held

³ The term was introduced by Peter Unger (1984).

by its objectors. I believe that a fresh reading of the theory would show that EC has the resources not only to defend its basic intuitions, and its internal coherence, but also to fight with the objectors on their own ground. EC, it seems to me, presupposes more than it usually says, and those presuppositions are extremely important for a full-blown answer to the criticisms, and for a proper accommodation of skepticism.

In the first chapter, I lay down the general contextualist framework, under which every contextualist theory stands, and I show how this framework can help us in dealing with the skeptical puzzle. I begin by explaining what the skeptical puzzle is, how it threatens to deny our knowledge of the external world, and what the main anti-skeptical strategies are. I then move to the contextualist approach, presenting its *modus operandi* in connection to skepticism, and sketching the general contextualist framework in its most important details. At the end of the first chapter, I review the three most influential contextualist theories,⁴ showing how they are connected to the general framework.

In the second chapter, I discuss the main criticism of EC. According to this criticism, EC is in no position to claim a resolution of the skeptical puzzle, simply because it does not have the necessary strength for such a task. On one version of this objection, EC does not properly answer the skeptic because EC's main thesis is only a metalinguistic one, bearing no real consequences on epistemology (Sosa 2000, 2004, Conee 2005, Bach 2005). On the second version of the same objection, EC misconstrues the skeptical challenge: it simply misses the point that the skeptic is making (Feldman 1999, 2001, 2004, Kornblith 2000, Klein 2000, 2005, Bach 2005 etc.). After presenting these objections, and certain responses to them

⁴ Cohen (1988, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2005), DeRose (1992, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2009), Lewis (1979, 1996). I have decided to discuss only these three theories because, on the one hand, they are the most influential (Heller 1999 and Blome-Tillmann 2009, for example, are very similar to Lewis's approach; Neta 2002, 2003 follows the footsteps of Cohen, while Rieber 1998 seems to enter into a debate with DeRose), and, on the other hand, even if every other contextualist theory brings about substantial differences, I do not believe that my argument will lose its power if I concentrate in this thesis only on the three main approaches.

(focusing especially on Cohen), I discuss whether these responses are good enough for what I perceive to be the real capabilities of EC. The answer is no.

That is why, in the third chapter, I put forward a fresh reading of contextualism that is, I hope to show, able to advertise the theory better, especially in the eyes of those who believe that we are capable of dealing with skepticism even on its own ground. In this chapter, I start by pointing out that one of EC's main presuppositions is that justification (or whatever is considered to be the epistemic support for various beliefs, by individual contextualist theories) is gradational, but unchangeable. These two characteristics are essential for what I take to be a fresh reading of the theory. If the justification of a belief remains the same, irrespective of the context in which that belief is evaluated, then this opens the way for a new concept, which I call 'proto-knowledge': using this concept, we grasp something important from the way we epistemically cope with reality. My claim is that that proto-knowledge can help us understand the place of fallibilism in contextualist theories and, in this way, it can help us answer the skeptic more adequately.

Indeed, I believe that proto-knowledge is something that we can claim to possess even in skeptical contexts. I explain how this can be done in the last chapter, the fourth one. Here I start by generalizing the results of the previous chapter (which were applied, for the sake of simplicity, to only one contextualist theory), arguing that proto-knowledge, as defined in relation to Stewart Cohen's contextualism, can be found also in DeRose's and Lewis's theories. I then engage directly with the skeptical puzzle, showing how proto-knowledge can give us a Moorean stance (as it is called) towards skepticism. In the meanwhile, I hope to answer the objections posed in the second chapter, by arguing that the new reading of contextualism has the significant advantage of providing a more straightforward answer to its objectors, simply because it responds to their criticisms on their own ground. At the end, I engage with some possible objections to my own fresh reading of contextualism.

The final claim of this thesis is that an accommodation of the skeptical position is possible, and that the objections against this accommodation can be dealt with, if we care to read contextualism in a slightly different manner. The main idea of this thesis is, I believe, quite modest: I do not think that what I propose here is an entirely new reading of EC. It is just a way of emphasizing its presuppositions, which, unfortunately, quite often are forgotten in the heat of the argument.

Chapter 1. – A Reading of Contextualism

Epistemic contextualism was created as a new solution to the skeptical argument. Almost all contextualists (with the exception of Ludlow 2005) claim that this still remains the most important incentive for endorsing a contextualist theory. Let me then start by discussing the skeptical puzzle and how EC is considered to provide a new solution to it. I will then engage with the three most influential contextualist theories, to see how they cash out the general contextualist intuition.

1.1. Skepticism

1.1.1. The skeptical puzzle. Contextualists are usually concerned with the following form of the skeptical puzzle (Feldman 1999, 94):

- I know some ordinary empirical propositions to be true.
- If I do not know the skeptical alternatives to be false, then I do not know the ordinary empirical propositions to be true.
- I do not know the skeptical alternatives to be false.

We can replace the ordinary propositions, and, respectively, the skeptical hypotheses, with some specific examples:

1. I know that I have hands
2. If I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat (henceforth BIV), then I do not know whether I have hands
3. I do not know that I am not a BIV

This is indeed a puzzle, because the three sentences are inconsistent together: (2) and (3) imply the denial of (1). Also, the three sentences are independently plausible:

(1) We frequently claim to know such mundane things as the fact that we have hands, that the earth is spinning around the sun, that humans need to eat in order to survive, and so on. These attributions of knowledge are surely part of common sense.

(2) The second sentence is based on the principle of deductive closure. According to this principle, knowledge is closed under its entailments: if a subject *S* knows *p* and *S* knows that *p* entails *q*, then *S* knows *q*. E.g. if *S* knows that Angela Merkel is the chancellor of Germany and *S* knows that Angela Merkel being the chancellor of Germany implies that she is German, then *S* knows that Angela Merkel is German. Similarly, if I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat (BIV) and I know that being a BIV implies not having hands, then I do not know whether I have hands or not.

(3) The third sentence is based on the fact that one cannot know whether the skeptical scenario is true or not, because one would have the same total evidence both for the situation in which one is not in a skeptical scenario and for the situation in which one is in a skeptical scenario. This is precisely the role of any skeptical hypothesis: if I were a BIV, I would have the same evidential inputs as if I were not a BIV.

1.1.2. Possible solutions. The classical solutions to this puzzle presuppose the denial of at least one of the component sentences:

Denial of (1). This is the skeptical position (Unger 1975, Klein 2005). Given the irrefutability of the skeptical hypothesis (3), and given that the skeptical hypothesis presupposes the denial of any knowledge of mundane facts (2), the skeptic asks us to simply deny that we have any knowledge of the external world.

Denial of (2). This presupposes the denial of the principle of deductive closure (Dretske 1970, Nozick 1981, Heller 1999).⁵ If this principle is denied, then both (1) and (3) are saved.

⁵ This principle was denied either because it does not fit with the authors' conception of knowledge (it is denied by Nozick's criterion of sensitivity, and by Dretske's and Heller's theories of relevant alternatives), or because it is countered by various examples. Consider the following (Dretske 1970, 1015-16): if you are at a zoo and you see an animal that looks like a zebra, in a cage on which the name "zebras" is written very clearly, and, besides that, you hear the people working at the zoo talking about the animal living in that cage as being a zebra, would you know that you see a zebra? The obvious answer is yes. But, the counter-argument goes, would you also know that the animal in the cage is not a painted mule, disguised by the zoo workers especially for you? Well, you would not be that sure any more. It seems that (i) you do know that the animal in front of you is a

Even if I do not know the denial of the skeptical hypothesis (in this case that I might be a BIV), this does not hinder me from knowing the fact that I have hands.

Denial of (3). This is the classical Moorean position. G.E. Moore (1993) was famous for arguing for the existence of the external world based on his certain belief that he has hands. He thus claimed that we know the denial of the skeptical hypothesis, precisely because we know for sure such mundane things as the fact that we have hands. His solution to skepticism, therefore, is to simply reverse the skeptical argument: if we take as granted (1), and we accept that (2) is also true, then we have to conclude that (3) is false. The Moorean position has received, nevertheless, a great deal of criticisms, precisely because of its apparent ad-hoc character. Thus, the contemporary neo-Moorean answers to the skeptical puzzle are significantly more complex (Sosa 1999, Pritchard 2002 etc.), and, arguably, better defended; even if they maintain the straightforward Moorean refutation of the skeptical hypothesis.

These are, so to say, the classical resolutions of the skeptical puzzle. The problem with each of them is that they either deny very plausible and intuitive positions (the denial of ordinary knowledge claims or of deductive closure), or they provide what seems to be a stubborn solution to the skeptical puzzle (in the case of the Moorean and neo-Moorean stances).⁶

1.1.3. Epistemic contextualism. EC seems to handle better these requirements: it does not fall prey to an unwelcomed refutation of intuitive principles; and it is not stubborn either. The contextualist strategy for dealing with the above puzzle is to say that all three sentences are true, but in different contexts of attribution (Cohen 1999, 67; Cf. DeRose 1995). (1) is true in day to day contexts (when discussing the grocery list, or who got elected president),

zebra, (ii) you do know that if it is a zebra than it is not a painted mule, but, apparently, (iii) you do not know that this animal is not a painted mule. The principle of deductive closure is thus dismissed.

⁶ We have seen already the problems with Moore's actual position. Neo-Mooreanism (most effectively advertised by Sosa 1999, 2007, Williamson 2000, and Pritchard 2009) was also accused of stubbornness (Pritchard 2009). For a general discussion of contemporary neo-Mooreanism, see Pritchard (2002, 2009).

while (3) is false in these contexts. On the other side, (3) is true in epistemological and skeptical discussions, yielding (1) false. (2) is the only sentence true in all contexts. The skeptic is therefore right in saying that we do not know much, but only in very specific contexts. In the most common, daily contexts, the skeptic is wrong: we do know a lot.

This strategy is based on the main thesis of EC, according to which the word ‘knowledge’ is context-sensitive. This means that knowledge sentences (sentences containing knowledge claims like ‘*S* knows *p*’) change their truth conditions – and, respectively, their truth values – according to the context of their utterance (according to the context of the attributer of knowledge). The sentence ‘Moore knows that he has hands’ is true in the context of daily discussions, but false in the skeptic contexts. The word ‘knowledge’ itself changes its content from one context of attribution to another.

In order to understand what this thesis amounts to, and to further explain how EC captures the persuasiveness of the skeptical position, I propose to first discuss the general framework put forward by all contextualists (in 1.2.), and then fill up this general remarks with substantial details – which differ from theory to theory (in 1.3.).

1.2. Bare contextualism.

Let me start with an example. Suppose that Sylvie is very much concerned about her car, given that her workmate’s car was stolen from the company’s parking lot a week ago. In spite of the increase in security, Sylvie is still checking her car every few hours, just to be sure: sometimes she goes in person to check it, other times she asks the security for confirmation, but most often she takes a short look at the surveillance cameras to see if the car is still there. Now, think about the following two cases:

A. Sylvie’s boss meets her after one of her checks and asks whether the car is still in the parking lot. Given that she just saw it on the cameras, and

given the alleged reliability of the cameras, her boss ends up saying to himself: ‘Well, Sylvie *knows* that her car is in the parking lot’.

B. Sylvie is called on the phone by her brother and asked about the car. Suppose now that Sylvie’s brother is a very suspicious guy, who does not trust very much the surveillance cameras (a thief stole his bicycle from the garage without his home cameras recording anything), and tells his sister ‘Oh, but you *don’t know* whether the car is still there by simply watching the cameras, you need to go there in person and check’.

It seems obvious, the contextualist says, that, given the justification Sylvie has in the above cases – her looking at the cameras – the sentence ‘Sylvie knows that her car is in the parking lot’ is true if asserted by Sylvie’s boss, but false if uttered by Sylvie’s suspicious brother. But why? Why is the truth value of this sentence different, even if Sylvie’s total evidence remains the same? What is the mechanism behind this change?

As pointed above, the main thesis of EC is that **‘knowledge’ is a context-sensitive term: sentences containing knowledge claims change their truth conditions – and therefore their truth value – according to the context of their utterance.** In order to understand what this means, let us consider now another way of making the same point (Rysiew 2011): **the proposition expressed by a given knowledge sentence depends upon the context in which that sentence is uttered** (by the attributor of knowledge).⁷ Thus, a knowledge sentence can express a full proposition only given a certain context of attribution: the sentence cannot have a truth value without the specification of the context in which that sentence is uttered (i.e. without the context in which knowledge is attributed). In this sense, knowledge sentences

⁷ Please note that this definition presupposes that there are such things as propositions, representing the meaning of certain sentences. This claim is controversial. But let us suppose it is true, for the sake of the argument. A knowledge sentence expresses a proposition only if the context of the utterer of that knowledge sentence is transparent.

resemble sentences containing indexicals (Cohen 1988): the truth value of ‘*I work here*’ depends on the context in which the sentence is uttered and on who is the speaker that utters it. The sentence expresses no proposition, and the words *I* and *here* have no content, if the context in which the sentence is uttered is not specified. In the case of knowledge, just as in the case of indexicals, the context of the utterer is an integral part of the sentence expressing a proposition.

We can now go back to our main contextualist claim, according to which ‘knowledge sentences change their truth conditions – and therefore their truth values – according to the context of their utterance’. It is apparent now why the same sentence can have different truth values in different contexts of attribution: the proposition expressed thereof differs according to the changes in contexts, changes that affect the truth conditions of the sentence. ‘Sylvie knows that her car is in the parking lot’ expresses one proposition when uttered by Sylvie’s boss, and another proposition when uttered by Sylvie’s brother.

But what are these truth conditions and how do they change? What exactly affects, from the context of attribution, what proposition is expressed, and what the truth value of that proposition is? Unfortunately, there are no general answers to these questions. Each contextualist theory posits a different explanation of what the truth conditions of knowledge claims are, and how they change. The difference between these theories is primarily made by the theory of knowledge they each presuppose: what counts as truth conditions for knowledge claims depends on what knowledge means in the first place; hence the differences. We will discuss some of the most important contextualist theories in a moment. Let me first make some more observations about the general framework.

Obs1. A note about terminology. I said that ‘knowledge’ is context-sensitive; that means that the content of the word ‘knowledge’, just as the content of an indexical, depends on the context of the person who utters it. The utterer, in the case of knowledge, refers to the so

called ‘ascriber’, or ‘attributer’ of knowledge. In this sense, utterer, speaker, ascriber and attributer will refer to the same person: the person who claims that the subject of a knowledge sentence (E.g. ‘*S* knows *p*’, ‘*S* doesn’t know *p*’) possesses or not knowledge. Again, the subject of a knowledge sentence is not the same as the ascriber of knowledge (although it can be, as in ‘*I* know *p*’).

Obs2. It is extremely important to note (Rysiew 2011) that EC is a semantic or metalinguistic theory. It is also an epistemological theory because, and only because, it refers to epistemological terms like ‘knowledge’ (and not to other non-epistemological context-sensitive terms). Thus, EC is not a theory about knowledge itself – it is NOT a theory of knowledge – but a theory about the applications of the word ‘knowledge’. This is crucial, because a theory of knowledge usually talks about the nature, conditions (structure) and extent of knowledge, while bare EC is only a thesis about the way the word ‘knowledge’ is used. Of course, every contextualist theory is accompanied by a specific theory of knowledge – as we will see – but that does not mean that EC alone commits itself to any substantive options.

Obs3. EC being a linguistic theory, it differs from more substantive theories that bear the name ‘contextualism’ – as is Michael Williams’ contextualist theory of knowledge (1991, 2001), or David Annis’ contextualist theory of justification (1978).

Obs4. EC also differs from more recent theories of knowledge attributions, which were inspired by the first contextualist theories. Subject sensitive invariantism (supported by Hawthorne 2004 and Stanley 2005) makes the claim that the truth values of knowledge sentences depend not on the context of the attributer of knowledge, but on the context of the subject of knowledge. That is why EC is sometimes called ‘attributer contextualism’, in order to differentiate it from its rival.

1.3. Contextualist theories

Epistemic contextualism is the thesis that knowledge sentences change their truth conditions – and, respectively, their truth values – according to the context of their utterance (according to the context of the attributer of knowledge). Two questions are in place here: i) what are these truth conditions, and ii) how do they change? In Schaffer's (2005, 115) formulation, "which epistemic gear the wheels of context turn"? Well, the answers to these questions depend on what theory of knowledge we have in mind. Let me start with an internalist version.

1.2.1. Cohen

Stewart Cohen (1988, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2005) supports a traditional conception of knowledge, according to which knowledge requires justification; be it evidence or reason to maintain a (true) belief. But one's reasons do not need to make one's belief absolutely irrefutable, in order for that belief to count as knowledge. The standards for how good one's reasons have to be (in order for the belief to be considered knowledge) are determined by the context of the attributer of knowledge. Thus, in our example above, the context in which Sylvie's boss finds himself imposes sufficiently low standards in order for him to consider Sylvie's reasons (the fact that she saw the car on the surveillance cameras) good enough for knowledge. That cannot be said, nevertheless, also about the Sylvie's brother's context. According to his standards, Sylvie's current reasons are not good enough for him to attribute her knowledge.

We can now answer the first question above: for Cohen, one of the truth conditions of any knowledge sentence is the standard for how good one's reasons have to be in order to consider one's belief knowledge. As you can see, this is what changes from context to context, and this is what makes a sentence of the form '*S* knows *p*' (as 'Sylvie knows that her car is in the parking lot') either true or false.

The second question is “how does this change occur?” In ‘How to be a fallibilist’, Cohen talks about ‘elements that underscore the statistical nature of our reasons’. (1988, 106) One such element is mentioning an error possibility. Thus, if in one’s context an error possibility is mentioned (or presupposed), such that it underscores the statistical nature of the subject’s reasons, then the standards (for how good the subject’s reasons have to be in order to consider the subject’s belief knowledge) tend to be higher than in the context in which such mentioning does not occur. The fact that Sylvie’s brother presupposes that surveillance cameras are not a reliable source of information, and that it might be the case that the cameras do not work, entails his reluctance to attribute knowledge to his sister. Sylvie’s boss does not presuppose such an error possibility; therefore, in his context, ‘Sylvie knows that her car is in the parking lot’ is true.

Here is then the answer to the second question above: the standards of knowledge shift because an error possibility (which cannot be refuted by the subject’s reasons at the moment) is either made salient or not in one’s context of attribution.

Cohen’s particular answer to the skeptical puzzle is a bit more complicated. Given that a subject’s evidence can never be sufficient (even in ordinary contexts) in order for an utterer to attribute knowledge to that subject (any evidence we might have for the belief that we are not BIVs would be falsely inoculated to us, if we were), it follows that Cohen has to appeal to ‘non-evidential criteria of rationality’ (Cohen 1999, 68) in order to cope with this problem: “Although we may concede that we have no evidence in support of [the belief that we are not BIV], it still seems intuitively compelling that the belief is rational – at least *to some degree*” (*Ibid.*, Cohen’s emphasis). This is why we can claim, in ordinary contexts, to know that we are not BIV. At the same time, the standard for rationality is greater in epistemological / skeptical contexts, such that our knowledge claims about not being BIV are rendered false there.

1.3.2. DeRose.

We now move to an externalist version of EC. According to Keith DeRose (1992, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2009), knowledge requires a tracking mechanism, called by him the Rule of Sensitivity:

“When it is asserted that some subject *S* knows (or does not know) some proposition *P*, the standards for knowledge (the standards of how good an epistemic position one must be in to count as knowing) tend to be raised, if need be, to such a level as to require *S*'s belief in that particular *P* to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge.” (DeRose 1995, 36)⁸

Thus, for DeRose the truth value of ‘*S* knows *p*’ is determined by the conversational context in which that sentence is asserted (explicit) or presupposed (implicit). How come? *S*'s epistemic position in regard to *p* can be stronger or weaker. The epistemic position is determined, sensitively, by how far it is, from the actual world, the closest possible world where $\neg p$ implies *Bp*. The further it is, the stronger is *S*'s epistemic position in respect to *p*. Now, in a conversational context the epistemic standard of the context is determined by the strongest epistemic position of that context. Therefore, no matter how strong or weak is *S*'s epistemic position in respect to *p*, in a given context, the belief that *p* has to be sensitive compared to the standard; only then is ‘*S* knows *p*’ true for that context. Sure enough, in a conversational context some beliefs are explicit while others are just implicit. The epistemic standard of that context is nonetheless determined only by the strength of the explicit beliefs. In other words, even if a belief requires a very high epistemic position, if that belief is implicit, it has to be sensitive only in respect to the epistemic standard of the context (determined by the strongest explicit belief), if it is to count as knowledge. In our case

⁸ What does it mean for a belief to be sensitive? The concept of sensitivity was introduced by Robert Nozick (1981), and it says that *S* knows *p* if, were *p* to be false, *S* would stop believing *p* (in all close possible worlds, if $\neg p$ then $\neg B(p)$).

skeptical case, if our belief that we are not BIV is implicit in a context where the standard is not very high, then in that context we can indeed know the denial of the BIV hypothesis.

And this is how DeRose's EC answers the two questions above: i) the truth conditions for a certain knowledge sentence are determined by the standard imposed by the most demanding explicit belief made salient in a context (again, Sylvie's brother explicitly warns her about the unreliability of the surveillance cameras, and that is why he does not attribute knowledge to her); ii) the shift is explained by the fact that the most demanding explicit belief made salient in a context change from context to context.

1.3.3. Lewis

David Lewis (1979, 1996) has a rather peculiar contextualist theory. He is the only one who explicitly denies that knowledge is fallible, and, furthermore, it does it in a framework that excludes justification. According to Lewis,

“Subject *S* knows proposition *p* iff *p* holds in every possibility left uneliminated by *p*'s evidence; equivalently, iff *S*'s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-*p*.” (1996, 551)

As we can see, there is no mention of justification in his definition. He strongly believes that justification is a relic of an unwelcomed epistemology: “the link between knowledge and justification must be broken” (1996, 351). Furthermore, fallibilism itself is rejected: “if you claim that *S* knows that *p*, and yet you grant that *S* cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which not-*p*, it certainly seems as if you have granted that *S* does not after all know that *p*. To speak of fallible knowledge, of knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error, just sounds contradictory.” (*Ibid.*)

Let us go back to his definition. In order for *S* to know *p*, *S*'s evidence has to eliminate every possibility in which not-*p*. But what is every? Sure enough, Lewis does not consider that all possibilities that exist need to be eliminated, but only the relevant ones (from this

point of view, he is a supporter of the relevant alternatives theory of knowledge),⁹ and what is relevant depends on the context of the attributer. Thus, his definition becomes “*S* knows that *p* iff *p* holds in every possibility left uneliminated by *S*'s evidence - Psst! - except for those possibilities that we are properly ignoring.” (1996, 561)

Lewis' answer to the first question above, then, is that the truth value of a knowledge sentence is conditioned on the range of possibilities that need to be eliminated by a subject in order for the subject to know something. And that varies with context. While Sylvie's boss ignores the possibility that the cameras are malfunctioning, Sylvie's brother takes that possibility very much into consideration. This is why the sentence ‘Sylvie knows that her car is in the parking lot’ has different truth values in the two contexts. The shift is explained by several conversational rules (which Lewis take into consideration). The most important one is the Rule of Relevance. ‘More a triviality than a rule’, as Lewis says (1996, 559), the rule stipulates that when a possibility is not ignored at all, it is not properly ignored. If Sylvie's brother does not ignore the skeptical possibility, he is not properly ignore it; hence his refusal to attribute knowledge.

Lewis' resolution of the skeptical argument is straightforward: in ordinary contexts, the skeptical hypothesis is a farfetched possibility, which we can easily – and properly – ignore.

⁹ The relevant alternatives theory (RA henceforth) was introduced in the epistemological discussions by Fred Dretske (1970, 1981), and subsequently developed by Alvin Goldman (1976) and Gail Stine (1976). The basic idea behind RA is that a subject *S* knows a proposition *p* if and only if *S* can rule out all the relevant alternatives to *p*. An alternative to *p* is a proposition *q* that is incompatible with *p* (the two cannot be both true). Again, two questions are in place: i) what is a *relevant* alternative and ii) what does it mean for it to be *ruled out*? The general answer for (i) is that a relevant alternative (*q* to *p*) is an alternative “that a person must be in an evidential position to exclude (when he knows that *p*)” (Dretske 1981, 365). Why does it have to be excluded? There are two answers here: either because *q* is an objective possibility (Dretske), or because we regard *q* as a possibility (Goldman, Stein). As for (ii), the opinions are quite unsettled (Black 2006): to eliminate a relevant alternatives *q* means either to have strong enough evidence to know that non-*q*, or to have very good reasons to believe that non-*q*, etc.

(3) is denied, while (1) is maintained. In skeptical contexts, the skeptical hypothesis is impossible to ignore.

*

These being said, it is not the moment to move to the main objections against the contextualist solution to the skeptical puzzle.

Chapter 2. – Problems With the Skeptic

Epistemic contextualism has surely received a great deal of criticism.¹⁰ The most used and, at the same time, threatening criticism of EC seems nevertheless to be the fact that it does not represent (or so are the objectors arguing) a proper solution to the skeptical puzzle. This objection hits EC in its most sensitive point: it threatens to take away its greatest advantage, that of solving the skeptical puzzle without committing to any unwelcomed results.

According to one form of this objection (Sosa 2000, 2004, Bach 2005, 2010, Conee 2005), because it is only a semantic/metalinguistic claim about the use of a word (be that ‘knowledge’), EC bears no real consequences on the epistemological issue of whether we truly know anything, given the skeptical argument. It is one thing to say that ‘*S* knows *p*’ is often true, and another to say that *S* really knows that *p* (Sosa 2004, 281).

According to another version of the same objection (Feldman 1999, 2000, 2004, Klein 2000, 2005, Kornblith 2000, Sosa 2000, Williams 2001, Bach 2005, Conee 2005), EC misconstrues the skeptical position, such that its alleged solution answers not to the most threatening version of the skeptical argument – called Full-Blooded Skepticism by Kornblith (2000, 27) – but to a less threatening, half-hearted skepticism – dubbed (*Ibid.*) ‘High Standards Skepticism’.

In the end, both versions point to the fact that EC alone (bare contextualism as it was called above) is too weak of a theory in order to shed any light on the skeptical puzzle. In order to have any epistemological bearings, the objectors claim, EC needs to provide a proper theory of knowledge. But then, if the skeptical puzzle is solved (and that is a big if), it is not

¹⁰ Varying from the claim that ‘knowledge’ is not actually a context-sensitive term (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, Stanley 2005), to the objection that EC entails a kind of modern pyrrhonism (Fogelin 1999), or that it presupposes a mistaken error theory (Schiffer 1996, Bach 2005, Conee 2005).

solved by the contextualist thesis alone (the thesis that ‘knowledge’ is context-sensitive), but by the particular theory of knowledge endorsed by various contextualist authors.

Let me discuss now these two versions of the objection in what follows, and see whether contextualists have the proper resources to answer them. I will begin with the metalinguistic complaint.

2.1. EC is only metalinguistic

2.1.1. The problem. Remember when I said (Obs. 2) that EC is a semantic theory about the use of a word, and the only reason why it is called ‘epistemic’ is because that word is ‘knowledge’. But if this is the case, if EC is indeed a metalinguistic theory about the use of the word ‘knowledge’ and about the way this use affects the truth values of certain knowledge claims, then it might be objected that this linguistic fact bears no consequences on the nature and the extent of knowledge itself; it helps us in no way in our dealings with the skeptic.

According to Sosa (2000), the contextualist strategy for dealing with the skeptical puzzle is to **replace a question** (whether we have knowledge), **with a related but different question**: “about words that formulate one’s original question, the contextualist asks when those words are correctly applicable.” (2000, 1) Nevertheless, this move seems to be controversial. It might be objected that the correct application of ‘knowledge’ in certain contexts (ordinary contexts, as it is) bears no relevance on the epistemological issue of what the extent of knowledge is. Suppose that (Sosa 2000, 3) people often utter truths when they say “Somebody loves me”. Does that influence in any way the question of whether somebody does indeed love *me*? Or consider that (Sosa 2000, 5), when Mother Theresa is considered for sainthood, somebody asks how much real love (meaning selfless good will) there is in the world. Surely the fact that sexual attraction abounds bears no relevance on the issue. In the same vein, Sosa argues, somebody might be doubtful that the correct application of a

knowledge sentence in an ordinary context ('I know that there is a desk in front of me') is of any relevance for the issue of what the nature and the extent of knowledge are – given that this question is asked in an epistemological context.

In other words, EC commits itself, according to this objection, to what Sosa calls the *contextualist fallacy* (2000, 2): “the fallacious inference of an answer to a question from information about the correct use of the words in its formulation.” Even if the contextualist thesis is correct – namely, even if ‘knowledge’ is indeed context-sensitive, and the truth value of knowledge sentences do vary with the attributer’s context – this metalinguistic claim does not affect in any way the epistemological question, asked in epistemological contexts, of whether humans are in possession of factual knowledge or not. The attributions of knowledge in loose contexts do not make contact in any way with the attributions of knowledge in stricter – and more relevant – philosophical contexts (See also Conee 2005, 52 - 53).

2.1.2. Cohen’s answer to this objection (1999, 79-80) comes in two steps. He first points out that not all epistemological contexts are such that they entail the falsity of most of our knowledge claims. While, indeed, in the epistemological contexts in which the extent of knowledge is discussed, the standards for what counts as knowledge (as he formulates it) do increase to such a degree that it makes hard to attribute knowledge, in the epistemological contexts in which, for example, the nature or the conditions of knowledge are discussed, the epistemic standards tend to be lower, such that knowledge is significantly easier to attribute.

Second (1999, 80), Cohen notes that Sosa’s point does not contravene at all with the contextualist solution to the skeptical puzzle. It is one of EC’s main claims that what we say about knowledge in ordinary contexts is separated from what we say about knowledge in skeptical contexts. Sosa is therefore right in claiming that ordinary knowledge attributions do not bear consequences on epistemological questions – asked in epistemological contexts – about the extent of human knowledge. This is part of what contextualism **explicitly** says. It is

not just that ordinary talk does not affect epistemological talk, but, in fact, most of our factual knowledge claims are rendered false in skeptical / epistemological contexts. This is why EC can be also considered a skeptical view (Cohen 1999, 80): “the point of contextualism is to give skepticism its due, while blocking the troubling and unacceptable consequence that our everyday knowledge ascriptions are false.” As Lewis shockingly claims, “it will be inevitable that epistemology must destroy knowledge. That is how knowledge is elusive. Examine it, and straightway it vanishes.” (Lewis 1996, 560)

2.1.3. The problem with Cohen’s answer. Sure enough, this answer points to one of the central reasons why people are so reluctant to commit themselves to a contextualist resolution of the skeptical paradox. Our intuition is that we are in a slightly stronger epistemic position than the one in which contextualists put us: knowledge is something more stable than what Lewis pushes us to accept. Admittedly, we do recognize the strength of skepticism, but we also know that, when the debate will end, we will continue to live our lives as if the skeptical scenarios are false. We are absolutely certain that, even after the fiercest skeptical confrontations, at the end of the day, we will still know how to open the door, to feed the cat, or to write letters. We therefore cling to the claim that we know things, even when besieged by the most skeptical arguments. As Feldman formulates it, **EC “concedes to skeptics far more than is warranted”** (2001, 62), and that is simply “disappointing” (Feldman 2001, 62). We often claim to know facts about the external world, and we do that, in our opinion truthfully, even in epistemological or skeptical contexts.

Continuing this line of thought, Sosa (2004, 281) claims that a proper solution to the skeptical paradox can be only a Moorean one; one that refutes skepticism even in the epistemological context. “The Moorean stance is not about what one might say with truth in an ordinary context using the verb ‘knows’. It is rather a stance, adopted in a philosophical context, about what one then knows and, by extension, what people ordinarily know.” It is a

stance about knowledge itself, and not about the correctness of knowledge attributions. “Once we abandon the object language and ascend to the metalanguage, we abandon thereby the Moorean stance.”

2.1.4. This looks very much like **a dialogue of the deaf**. Each part has different expectations for what a solution to the skeptical paradox can do and cannot do, and they cannot accept the opposite perspective. On the one hand, the critics claim, EC does not take a proper Moorean stance, such that the contextualist metalinguistic thesis is rendered irrelevant to the really important question of whether we know anything. On the other hand, the answer to this objection is that we do not need to take a Moorean stance in order to deal with the skeptic. The peculiarity of EC is precisely the fact that it mediates between the Moorean stance and the Skeptical stance, without fully committing to any of them. The advantage of EC is that it explains both the attractiveness of the non-skeptical position, and the strength of the skeptical one. The critics disagree. They continue to claim that the contextualist concedes too much to the skeptic. Their intuition is that people continue to attribute knowledge (and they do it correctly) even in epistemological contexts. EC is too weak of a theory in the confrontation with the skeptic.

The best way to describe the feeling that arises from this debate is bewilderment: you are not sure who to declare the winner. It seems that the critics are touching something important but, at the same time, they completely miss the point. Is this only a conflict of intuitions? It might be. The persistent feeling, nevertheless, is that contextualists did not succeed in convincing their opponents that the latter’s objections do not touch them, nor did the critics succeed in definitively refuting EC. What is then to conclude from these discussions?

I believe that, while the contextualist defense does answer correctly to the objectors – the objectors do not succeed in refuting the internal coherence of EC – this defense does not satisfy. Or at least it does not satisfy me. I believe that there is something true about the

Moorean stance, beyond what contextualists claim to happen in ordinary contexts. I believe that quite many times we are able to ascribe some kind of knowledge, even if we are bombarded with skeptical scenarios. It just feels right, as the Moorean says, that I know things as the fact that I have hands, irrespective of the context of attribution. And I am also convinced that this is an intuition shared by quite many people who, recognizing the ingenuity of EC, are still reluctant to commit themselves to its claims. To conclude, then, my general impression is that, while not mistaken, Cohen's response to the objection misses something. I believe that the intuitions held by the objectors can be **better accommodated by EC**, without giving up anything from what EC essentially is. It just seems that we need a fresh reading of contextualism for that. And that is what I intend to do in the next chapter.

But let me first discuss the other version of the objection that EC does not provide a proper answer to the skeptic

2.2. EC and High-Standards

As I have noted in the last section of Chapter 1, one way of cashing out the EC thesis is by appealing to a shift in epistemic standards in order to explain the context-sensitivity of 'knowledge' (Cohen, DeRose). Thus, even if the subject has the same epistemic position / reasons / evidence, irrespective of the context of attribution, her belief counts as knowledge only if that epistemic position / reason / evidence meets a certain standard fixed by the attributer. This solves the skeptical puzzle, the contextualist claims, because it is not the case that in all contexts of attribution the denial of knowledge is true, while ordinary knowledge sentences are false. In the very demanding epistemological or skeptical context, this is indeed the case: the standards for what counts as knowledge are extremely high, such that almost no knowledge is admitted. In day to day contexts, on the other hand, ordinary knowledge sentences do in fact express true propositions, simply because the epistemic standards are sufficiently lowered in order for the subject's epistemic position / reasons / evidence to meet

them. Also, given that the skeptical hypothesis is not implicit in these latter contexts (to follow DeRose's explanation for the moment), we can claim that the subject knows even the denial of skeptical hypotheses given these contexts. The contextualist thus reconciles our conflicting intuitions concerning the skeptical puzzle, without denying any groundbreaking principle; hence the attractiveness of EC.

2.2.1. The problem. The problem with this solution, nevertheless, is that it misconstrues what the skeptical position is. Skepticism posits a problem not only for high standards contexts, but also, and more importantly, for ordinary standards. As Bach (2005, 68) says: "when a skeptic brings up far-fetched possibilities and argues that we can't rule them out, he is not raising the standards for what it takes to belong to the extension of the word 'knowledge'. Rather, he is using these possibilities to show that it is much tougher than we realize for a belief to qualify as knowledge at all, even by the normal standards governing ordinary contexts." And Feldman (2001, 78): "in at least some cases the leading idea behind skepticism is not that we fail to satisfy some extraordinarily high standards for knowledge but rather that, contrary to common belief, we typically **don't satisfy ordinary standard.**"

Indeed, EC, at least in the versions discussed thus far, does imply that the dialectic behind the skeptical puzzle is about different contexts raising or lowering the standards for what counts as knowledge (rendering thus a sentences either true, or false, depending on the context in which it is uttered), and not about whether a belief can be qualified as knowledge even by the most ordinary contexts. On the contrary, EC says that in ordinary contexts we do know, and we know a lot.

The problem with this is that "the debate about skepticism is [...] not a debate in which the quality of our evidence is agreed to and the debate results from differing views about what the standards for knowledge are. Instead, it is a debate about **how good our evidence is.**" (Feldman 2004, 32) The skeptic's point is not that a given evidence is not good enough for a

certain knowledge claim; it is rather that there cannot be any evidence whatsoever for the denial of a skeptical hypothesis and, given closure, **no evidence for ordinary claims** either (Klein 2000, 110). To use Kornblith's analogy (2000, 26 – 27), the skeptical position is not like the position of a Vermonter who would say that it is cold outside only if it is under -10 degrees Celsius, although she recognizes that there are important distinctions to be made in temperature above -10 degrees. In that case, our conflict with her (given that, supposedly, we do not live in Vermont, and -1 degree Celsius would also be cold for us) is just a linguistic one. No. A correct analogy with the skeptical position would be a Vermonter who, besides saying that 'cold' means only -10 degrees Celsius, would also believe that all temperatures above -10 degrees are on a par, and have no differential physical effect (2000, 26).

And to that, EC has no response. "Understood that way, it is difficult to see the epistemological significance of decisions about which standards are associated with the word 'knows' in any particular context. Contextualism is, from this perspective, **skepticism neutral**, in that it does not address this part of the issue." (Feldman 2004, 32) In Kornblith's terms (2000, 27), EC does not answer full-blooded skepticism, but only high-standards skepticism. And that is not enough.

2.2.2. Cohen's answer. One possible answer to this type of objection (Cohen 2001, 95 – 96) is to simply admit that, indeed, EC cannot answer Full-Blooded Skepticism. But, and there is a huge 'but' here, it should not even try. Full-Blooded Skepticism is not skepticism about knowledge, but about justification. It basically says that there is no non-circular justification for our beliefs. Certainly, that is a problem, a problem that should be dealt with in epistemology. But it does not mean that EC has the deal with it as it is. As Stewart Cohen nicely argues (2001, 96) "I don't see that it is a serious criticism of Contextualism that it does not respond to this other skeptical argument. As I see it, combating skepticism is a matter of refuting skeptical arguments. It is not a matter of somehow proving once and for all that we

know things. And there should be nothing surprising about the fact that a response to one kind of skeptical argument does not apply to another kind of skeptical argument. In fairness to Feldman [to whom he answers], it is certainly true that some contextualists have tended to overadvertise their view as a solution to *the* problem of skepticism. But, since there is no such thing as *the* problem, there is no such thing as *the* solution.”

2.2.3. The problem with Cohen’s answer. I believe that Cohen is right. He is right in saying that one single theory, especially if it is a semantic theory as EC is, cannot answer all the skeptical puzzles at once. Fighting with the skeptic takes both **time and a good strategy**. As I remarked from the very beginning, skepticism is a strong epistemological position, one that cannot be so easily refuted.¹¹ At the same time, nevertheless, it appears to me that, again, Cohen does not make the best case for his theory. It seems that, although EC per se does not need or cannot refute skepticism about justification in the form presented above, it does have a certain **presupposition** which, if scrutinized, might help showing that the full-blooded skeptic is wrong. Furthermore, it seems that this is not a random presupposition of the theory: it represents an essential part of what EC means, and only by taking it into account, and only by trying to give an answer to the full-blooded Skeptic, can we properly accommodate skepticism (as we defined this in the introduction – namely, as accepting the skeptical stance, but denying that it has such a daunting effect as dogmatic relativism). This presupposition is **fallibilism**.

Fallibilism is the thesis according to which almost no belief (there are few exceptions; e.g. beliefs about logical truths) can ever be rationally supported or justified in a conclusive manner (Hetherington 2005). I.e. we can always be mistaken concerning our justification; there can always be a possibility of error. Now, this ‘**justification-fallibilism**’, as it is called in the literature (Hetherington 2005), transposes itself in the talk about knowledge:

¹¹ Or at least this is the assumption of the present thesis.

knowledge-fallibilism is the thesis according to which a subject *S* can know *p* based on reason *r* even if *r* does not entail *p* (Fantl and McGrath 2011, 7; Cohen 1988, 91). It seems then that at least justification-fallibilism, if not knowledge-fallibilism as well, are presupposed by EC.¹² To take Cohen's version of the theory (1988, 1999): the context of attribution decides how strong one's justification has to be in order to claim that the subject's belief is an instance of knowledge. But this means that, in some contexts, one's justification need not be conclusive or irrefutable in order to call the justified belief 'knowledge', and, therefore, one knows *p* even if one's justification does not entail *p*. E.g.: Sylvie's boss truthfully claims that she knows that her car is in the parking lot because, even if her justification (looking at the cameras) does not entail the truth of her belief, it does meet the standards presupposed by the epistemic context of her boss.

Furthermore, it seems that fallibilism is a crucial element of what I called 'accommodating skepticism': accepting the strength of the skeptical argument, but denying that it entails relativism. Indeed, for there to exist an epistemic difference between our beliefs – even if they do not always pass the threshold of knowledge – it has to be the case that justification (or whatever we consider to be the epistemic support of a belief) is gradational: one is in the possession of proper justification even if this justification is not conclusive or irrefutable (as it is the case for lesser grades of justification). And this implies at least justification-fallibilism, if not knowledge-fallibilism. I will discuss in greater details all these claims in the next chapter.

For the moment, nevertheless, please notice that, if fallibilism is correct, and it is assumed by EC, then part of the answer to full-blooded skepticism is presupposed by the general contextualist framework. As we have seen, skepticism is not a "debate in which the quality of our evidence is agreed to and the debate results from differing views about what the standards

¹² See especially Cohen 1988.

for knowledge are. Instead, it is a debate about how good our evidence is.” (Feldman 2004, 32) And the skeptical argument shows us that that our evidence for the existence of the external world is not good at all. As Klein puts it (2000, 110), the really important claim the skeptic is making is that we cannot know an ordinary sentence (e.g. that we have hands) to be true, precisely because we cannot have “**any evidence whatsoever**” for believing that the skeptical scenario (e.g. that we are all BIVs) is false. But surely, if fallibilism is true, we do have the beginning of an answer to this problem. It does not have to be perfect, our evidence, in order to be proper evidence. Fallibilism is precisely the theory according to which our justification can be valid even if it does not entail the truth of a certain belief. Therefore, “how good our evidence is?” is answered by pointing to the fact that it does not have to be irrefutable in order to be considered **good** evidence. Klein is mistaken in saying that we do not have any evidence whatsoever for believing that we are not BIVs, and, respectively, that we have hands: it is just that the evidence we have is not irrefutable; it might be the case that we are wrong. Full-blooded skepticism, therefore, is challenged by the fallibilism presupposed by EC.¹³¹⁴

2.2.4. The problem with this second answer, nevertheless, is that **not all EC theories presuppose fallibilism**. As shown in the first chapter (1.3.3.), Lewis explicitly denies the fallibilistic thesis: “if you are a contented fallibilist, I implore you to be honest, be naive, hear it afresh: 'He knows, yet he has not eliminated all possibilities of error.' Even if you've

¹³ I will discuss in Chapter 4 two objections to this claim: i) the objection that fallibilism does not properly answer the criticism raised above and ii) the objection that, even if it does, there is no need for contextualism in this sense.

¹⁴ Furthermore, this cannot be the whole story. One has to explain, further, how justification is structured, how it transfers its epistemic value to the belief, or how it relates to knowledge – and those are topics in the theory of justification and knowledge, affected or presupposed in no way by bare EC. But it does matter, and it should have been emphasized by Cohen, that fallibilism – the first stage in answering this type of skepticism about justification, as shown above – is presupposed by EC, and therefore EC does help in sorting the issues, even concerning full-blooded skepticism. This is why I believe Cohen’s response to be incomplete.

numbed your ears, doesn't this overt, explicit fallibilism still sound wrong?" (Lewis, 1996, 550)¹⁵ How can we then make sense of this? Is it the case that EC, per se, does not in fact presuppose fallibilism?

One might try to answer that Lewis' fallibilism is only knowledge-fallibilism, and therefore it should not affect what we said earlier about justification. The problem is that Lewis denies the existence of justification as well. "I don't agree that the mark of knowledge is justification. [...] The link between knowledge and justification must be broken." (Lewis 1996, 551) Thus, Lewis is not only a knowledge-infallibilist, but he cannot be a justification-fallibilist either, given that he denies justification altogether.

2.2.5. We therefore got to a halt. I argued that Cohen's defense of EC (against the objection that EC is immune to full-blooded skepticism) is incomplete, because EC – bare EC – does presuppose something that can help us getting along even with this type of skeptic. The problem with this argument is that not all EC theories accept fallibilism. Lewis, besides being a declared knowledge-infallibilist, is also a declared anti-justification contextualist. It seems then that this line of defense of EC, against this objection, is doomed to failure. We have to follow Cohen and surrender to the objector.

Nevertheless, I do not agree with this conclusion. It seems to me that **there is a way out of this entanglement**. Lewis, in my opinion, is not an unrestricted infallibilist. His fallibilism is masked by a complicated confusion between I will call 'restricted infallibility' and 'unrestricted infallibility'. As I will explain in section (4.2.) below, a proper reading of

¹⁵ The problem is that fallible knowledge attribution sentences sound strange: statements of the form 'S knows *p*, but *p* might not be true' – usually called by epistemologists (Rysiew 2001; Daugherty and Rysiew 2009) 'concessive knowledge attributions' – seem contradictory. How could we coherently say (Littlejohn 2011, 603) that 'he knows, but he hasn't eliminated all possibilities of error'? E.g.: 'I know that Harry is a zebra, but it might be the case that Harry is just a painted mule'. These statements, the objector claims, simply sound incoherent (Lewis *Ibid.*).

contextualism should show that EC is, and has to be, a theory that presupposes fallibilism. It is just that in Lewis' version, this requirement gets terribly confused.

*

But in order to show that, and in order to reveal how a more Moorean stance towards skepticism can be supported by EC, I move now to my own reading of the theory. By interpreting EC in a slightly different manner, I hope to shed a fresh light on all these issues.

Chapter 3. – A Fresh Reading of Contextualism

My aim in this chapter is to propose a fresh reading of contextualism, a reading that can account better for the Moorean intuitions according to which we know factual things about the external world, even when discussing skeptical hypotheses. This is not to say that EC is wrong, or that it has to be changed. I believe that all we have to do is to look at the central claims of EC from a slightly different perspective. If we do that, we will notice not only that EC has the resources to support a Moorean stance in the skeptical debate, but that it also presupposes fallibilism – another crucial tool in our dealings with the skeptic.

For the sake of simplicity, I will start from one contextualist theory – Cohen’s – making my way to a conclusion that, I hope to show in the next chapter, can be generalized. I will break down my reading of contextualism in 10 short steps.

3.1. Gradualism

3.1.1. Step I. EC is the semantic theory according to which knowledge sentences change their truth conditions – and truth values – in respect to the conversational contexts in which they are uttered. EC comes in several versions; all depending on what substantive theory of knowledge is taken as granted. According to one such version (Cohen 1988, 1999), a knowledge sentence changes its truth value from one context of attribution to another given that the standard by which one’s justification¹⁶ is evaluated changes accordingly. In other words, while the justification remains the same, irrespective of the context of the attributer, what changes is the standard by which that justification is evaluated.

¹⁶ Cohen presupposes an internalist notion of justification: the reasons / evidence one has for believing something are accessible to the agent’s conscious reflection. E.g. Sylvie’s justification for believing that her car is in the parking lot (the fact that she herself is in the parking lot, and she can see the car there), is directly accessible to Sylvie’s reflection: she herself realizes that seeing the car there is a good justification for believing that the car is in the parking lot.

But that means that justification itself is gradational. Consider again our example. Sylvie can have a stronger or weaker justification concerning her belief:

- a) She might get the information that the car is in the parking lot from the security guard;
- b) She might look at the surveillance cameras;
- c) She might even see the car in front of her eyes, in the parking lot. She might touch it, smell it, or start the engine.

It seems plausible to say that, although the security guard's testimony represents a strong justification, it is weaker than the justification gained by watching the surveillance cameras – the security guard might lie, or misconstrue what he sees etc.; as they say, it is always better to see it with your own eyes. But then again, even *seeing the tapes* with your own eyes, as Sylvie's brother would like to persuade her, represents a slightly weaker justification than *seeing the car* with your own eyes, or than seeing and touching and smelling it. It seems then plausible to say that justification comes in degrees. Let us use indexes in order to mark the difference between the degrees.¹⁷

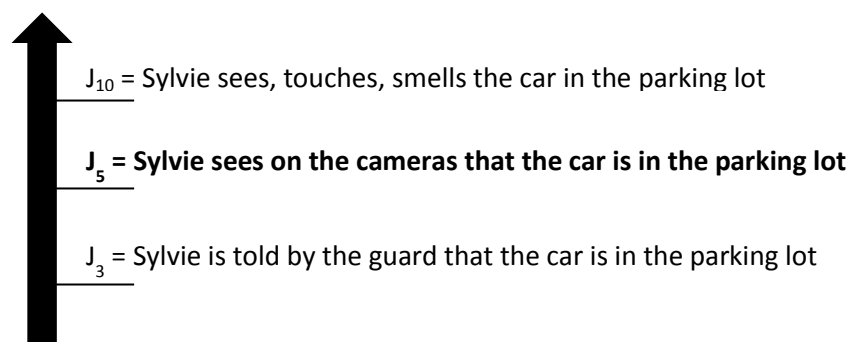


Fig.1

Thus understood, EC basically tells us that a sentence of the form ‘*S* knows *p*’ is true if the context in which that sentence is uttered presupposes a level of justification that is lower

¹⁷ Please note, nevertheless, that I am not committing myself to a position according to which the degrees of justification can be sharply differentiated. I use indexes only for the sake of simplicity. Also, the numerical difference between indexes bears no real significance, except that it shows which justification is approximated as being stronger.

than, or equal to, the level of justification of the subject. If the level of justification of the context is higher than the subject's level of justification, then '*S* knows *p*' is false in that context. In our case, if 'Sylvie knows that her car is in the parking lot' is uttered in a context in which the required level of justification is J_7 or higher, then, if Sylvie's actual justification is J_5 (Sylvie sees on the cameras that the car is in the parking lot), the sentence in question is false. If the context presupposes a lower than, or equal to, J_5 level of justification, and Sylvie's justification is J_5 , then the sentence 'Sylvie knows that her car is in the parking lot' is true.

3.1.2. Step II. Now, if justification is gradational, then the belief supported by that justification is itself gradational, relative to its support. Namely, a belief is epistemically-stronger or weaker, if justified differently. Suppose that at t_0 Sylvie believes that her car is in the parking lot because the security guard said that he saw it there a minute ago. Suppose further that at t_1 Sylvie has the same belief, this time because she is herself in the parking lot, looking at the car. It seems intuitive to say that Sylvie has an **epistemically-stronger belief** at t_1 than at t_0 .

Surely, this is more of a truism: if a belief is strongly justified then that belief is itself epistemically-strong. Please note, nevertheless, that this epistemic-strength of a belief should not be confused with the psychological strength (the confidence one has concerning one's belief).¹⁸ It is one thing to *believe more strongly* and another to *have an epistemically-stronger belief*. I might believe very strongly that Santa Claus exists, without having a very strong belief, in the epistemic sense, that he exists. Sylvie might believe very strongly in the word of the security guard, because she is naïve, but that does not mean that her belief is epistemically very strong (maybe the guard is actually totally unreliable). Again, the claim

¹⁸ Even if quite often the two go hand in hand: we tend to be more confident about a belief if we have good reasons to have that belief.

here is very modest: strong justification entails epistemically-strong belief; and that means that justified beliefs are gradational, relative to their justification.¹⁹

3.1.3. Step III. I said that justification comes in degrees and, correspondingly, the belief that is so justified comes in degrees, in respect to its justification. What makes this claim interesting is the fact that the belief might be true. If that is the case, then we have different **grades of a justified true belief** (fig.3), and that might lead, as we will see, to a very peculiar characteristic of EC.

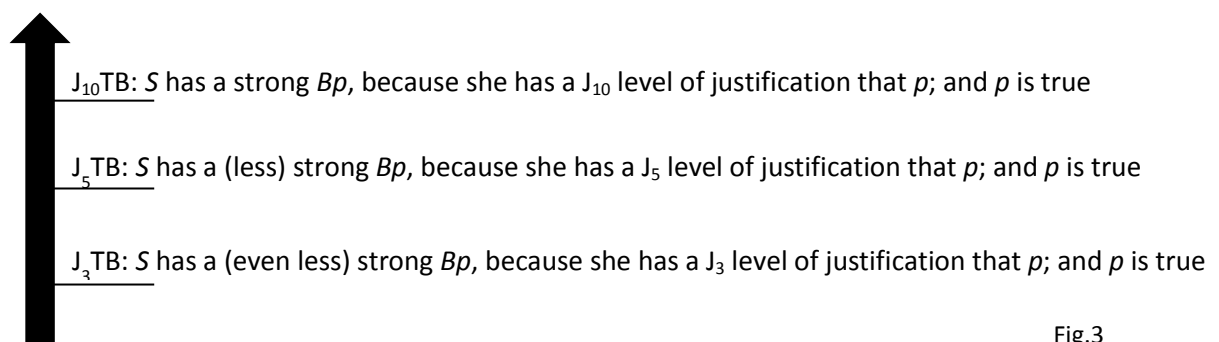


Fig.3

3.2. Knowledge and proto-knowledge

3.2.1. Step IV. When attributing knowledge, the justification remains the same, but the standards change with context; that is what EC – at least in the considered version – says.²⁰ Well, if that and (3.1.3.) above are correct, it means that when attributing knowledge, although the justified true belief remains the same (it remains with the agent), the standard by which that belief is evaluated changes with the context of the attributer. But again, **the justified true belief remains the same**. The agent has the same stronger or weaker justified true belief, although the name of that belief might be or might not be ‘knowledge’, depending on the attributer’s context. Sylvie continues to believe (and supposedly truthfully) that the car

¹⁹ Even if modest, this remark is important because, as we will see, it matters a lot that there are epistemic differences between justified beliefs, and not only between their justifications.

²⁰ When **the attributer** attributes knowledge, the justification of **the subject** remains the same, but the standards of **the attributer** change with context.

is in the parking lot, even if her brother does not believe that she knows that the car is there. This should again be a truism for EC.

3.2.2. Step V. According to (3.1.3.), an agent might have different grades of justified true beliefs: she might have an epistemically very strong belief that p , or a less strong one. According to (3.2.1.), she might entertain that justified true belief irrespective of whether it is called ‘knowledge’ or not. The act of calling that belief ‘knowledge’ is the job of the attributer of knowledge (although quite frequently the attributer is also the agent / subject) – this is what EC teaches us. But this means that *having the (true) justified belief* – on the subject’s part – stands in a certain relation to *calling that belief ‘knowledge’* – on the attributer’s part. Having the belief makes possible calling it ‘knowledge’. The belief itself seems to be some kind of **preliminary knowledge**, or **proto-knowledge**, ‘waiting’ for the attributer / utterer to call it like that, if the context of attribution is favorable.

I believe that these are crucial elements of EC. Let me repeat them.

Va. The process, event, state, or however you want to call it, of having a justified true belief makes possible the calling of that belief ‘knowledge’. In other words, it is **necessary** for truthfully calling it that way:

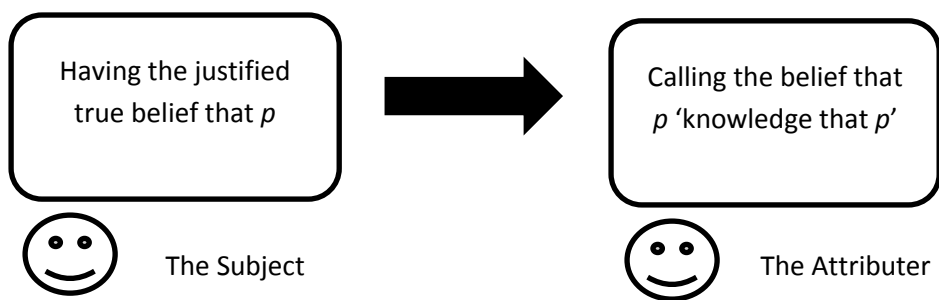


fig.4

S ‘knows’ that p **because** she truthfully and justified believes that p AND the justification is enough (for the attributer) to truthfully call the belief as such:

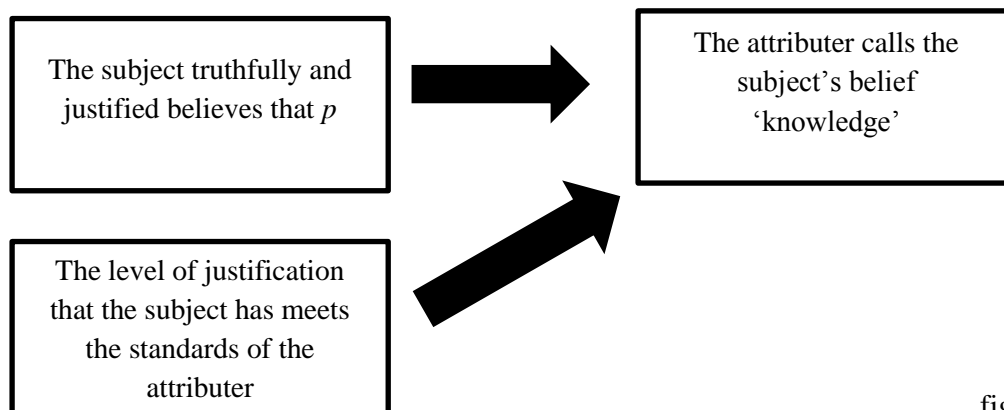


fig.5

Again, Sylvie's boss calls her belief 'knowledge' because that belief is strongly justified and true AND it meets her (Sylvie's boss) standards. Sylvie's brother does not call her belief 'knowledge' because, although her belief is strongly justified and (unbeknownst to him) true, it does not meet his standards of justification.

Vb. It is therefore not very difficult to understand why we might call the belief 'preliminary' or 'proto-knowledge': it is the belief that is called 'knowledge'. The existence of the belief makes the attribution of knowledge possible, although that attribution depends on other factors too.

3.2.3. Step VI. Step (V) above showed what the relation between having a belief and calling that belief 'knowledge' is. It thus seemed appropriate to name the justified true belief 'proto-knowledge'. Now, given that a justified (and presumably true) belief is entertained by the agent no matter if the utterer calls it 'knowledge' or not (3.2.1.), we might say that the belief is proto-knowledge **irrespective of the context** in which the utterer is. Sylvie believes that the car is in the parking lot, given her justification, no matter if her brother calls that belief 'knowledge' or not. She therefore 'proto-knows' that her car is there, irrespective of whether her brother attributes knowledge to her or not. Proto-knowledge, in the end, exists even without knowledge.

This might sound counter-intuitive. It would then follow that an agent proto-knows factual things about the world even if nobody claims that she knows them. My answer to this objection is the following: I used the formulation ‘proto-knowledge’ because it is suitable for the relation that the subject’s having the belief has with the attributer’s calling it ‘knowledge’. But if there is **no possible attributer** that would claim that that belief is knowledge, then, of course, that belief is **not** proto-knowledge. In other words, the first condition for a belief being proto-knowledge is that that belief can be at least once truthfully called ‘knowledge’; there has to be at least one context in which somebody can claim that that belief is knowledge.

A belief is proto-knowledge iff:

- It is strongly justified and true;
- It is possible to be truthfully called ‘knowledge’ in at least one context of attribution.

3.2.4. Step VII. A note of caution is needed here. In (3.2.3.) above I was referring **not to actual attributers** of knowledge, but to **possible ones**. It is not a matter of whether in the world today there is anybody that would attribute knowledge to a certain subject or not. That would make Eve’s situation (or the situation of the hypothetical last surviving human on earth) rather peculiar. Attributing knowledge is, in fact, a matter of possibility, not of actuality.

Another way of making this point is to say that, **if a justified true belief does not pass – in any context – certain requirements needed for it to be called ‘knowledge’, then that belief (even if justified and true) cannot be called ‘proto-knowledge’**. What are these requirements?

Well, on the one hand, we have to notice that this is a topic in the (substantive) theory of knowledge. What counts as a requirement for calling a certain belief ‘knowledge’ boils down

to what one considers knowledge, in essence, to be. And that varies from theory to theory. Nevertheless, I believe there is one universal attitude shared by all the parties: the epistemic support of a belief – irrespective of how it is conceived (in Cohen’s case this is internal justification) – should be proper: it should not allow the subject to believe something (even truthfully) in an inappropriate or mistaken manner. This requirement therefore targets Gettier cases: cases in which the agent comes to believe something through a wrong kind of justification.²¹

On the other hand, there is, I believe, a requirement that is not stipulated by the classical theory of knowledge. Consider the following case:²² Martha believes that she will lose the lottery, because she realizes that there is a very small statistical chance of fairly winning it. As it happens, she is right, she will indeed lose the lottery. Now, Martha’s belief, although justified and true, does not count as knowledge: irrespective of how great the chances are that she will lose the lottery (irrespective of how small the statistical chances of a win are), we cannot claim that she knows that she will lose it. Our intuition is that she simply does not possess knowledge of that sort.²³ The contextualist explanation of this case (Cohen 1988, 1998, Lewis 1996) is that our position as attributers of knowledge is such that we cannot ignore that an alternative possibility to Martha’s belief might be actually true – we cannot

²¹ Introduced by Gettier (1963), Gettier-type of examples marked more than anything else the history of contemporary epistemology in the last 50 years. Let me shortly review Gettier’s first example (1963, 122). Smith forms the belief \mathbf{b}_1 that ‘the man who has 10 coins in his pocket will earn the job’. Smith arrives at this belief through a fairly correct and legitimate deduction from his previous hold belief \mathbf{b}_0 : ‘Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket’; which belief, again, is justified by the fact that i) the president of the company told him that Jones will eventually be selected and ii) he himself saw very clearly (and counted) that Jones has 10 coins in his pocket. Nevertheless, as it happens, Smith himself is hired – not Jones – and, totally unbeknownst to him, he also has 10 coins in his pocket, exactly like Jones. Therefore, \mathbf{b}_1 is indeed a justified true belief but, as this example clearly shows, it cannot be considered an instance of knowledge – Smith had no idea who will be the hired person.

²² Firstly introduced in epistemological literature by Kyburg (1961).

²³ Even if, presumably, we are ready to attribute knowledge to Martha if she believes that she **most probably** will lose the lottery. This belief is nevertheless different from the belief that she **will** lose the lottery.

ignore that she might actually win, irrespective of how high the chances of a loss are; therefore, her justification does not meet the standards (elevated by the salient alternative) of our context. But please note: the situation is such that the alternative possibility can **never** be ruled out by the subject's justification – the alternative possibility is always relevant for our attributions of knowledge. And this is crucial. The lottery cases in general are constructed in such a way that, irrespective of his context, the attributer of knowledge **can never not think about the alternative possibility** to the subject's belief. The justification for the agent's belief (that she will lose the lottery) is never sufficient for that belief to be called 'knowledge': the attributer will **always** keep in mind the two alternatives (of winning and of losing), and therefore he will **always** claim that the agent does not know that she will lose the lottery. Again, irrespective of his context!²⁴

But if this is the case, then it seems that, besides having a proper justification, a belief can be called 'knowledge' only if its justification eliminates all the relevant alternative possibilities to the belief; what is relevant here being decided by the context of the attributer.²⁵ Therefore, if there is **no** context in which i) the relevant alternatives fixed by the context are considered to be ruled out by the agent's justification, and ii) the agent's justification is proper, then the agent's belief is not proto-knowledge.²⁶

3.2.5. Step VIII. Now, if this is the case, and if we can use the word 'proto-knowledge' to name an agent's belief irrespective of whether the current utterer calls it 'knowledge' as well – it has to be called 'knowledge' in at least one context, not necessarily in the actual one

²⁴ Further support for the claim that our common intuitions are that there is no knowledge in lottery cases, irrespective of how they are construed, can be found in experimental philosophy. See Turri and Friedman 2014.

²⁵ This point can be cashed out differently by different contextualist theories. I use the relevant alternatives vocabulary here (common to e.g. Cohen 1988, Lewis 1996, Heller 1999 etc.) for the ease of explanation, but this can be replaced with, for example, DeRose's contextual sensitivity requirement.

²⁶ Martha's belief that she will lose the lottery is **not** proto-knowledge. Please note that this restricts quite a lot the class of beliefs that counts as proto-knowledge. Not all justified true beliefs are proto-knowledge!

– then we can basically *attribute* proto-knowledge without considering the current context of attribution. But **proto-knowledge is a form of knowledge**. Surely, it is not proper knowledge: knowledge is by definition contextual; if we are to be contextualists we need to agree with that. But proto-knowledge is somehow the *context-neutral element of knowledge, the fixed component of knowledge*. And I do not think it would be a contextualist blasphemy to call proto-knowledge ‘**context-neutral knowledge**’, given that proper knowledge is itself contextual. Of course, proto-knowledge is not totally context-neutral. It is proto-knowledge if it is knowledge in at least one possible context. It is context-neutral in the sense that it need not depend on the current context of the attributer of knowledge for it to be called as such.

3.3. The consequences

3.3.1. Step IX. Supposing that what I said thus far is not fundamentally flawed, we have to notice that there are some important differences between knowledge and proto-knowledge. Two of them interest me in what follows.

i) First, notice that, while proto-knowledge is gradational (fig. 6) – given that it is a justified true belief, and we saw in (3.1.3.) that justified true beliefs are gradational – knowledge per se need not be so.

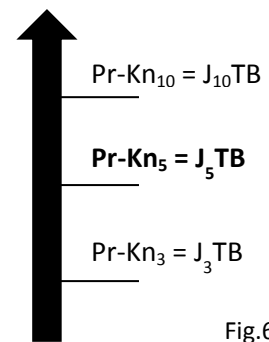


Fig.6

Indeed, it seems that epistemologists tend to believe that, irrespective of the fact that justification comes in degrees (and, supposedly, the justified true belief is gradational relative to its justification), knowledge itself is not gradational. This view is called ‘knowledge-absolutism’ (Hetherington 2011, 6): “once a belief is sufficiently well supported (all else being equal) to be knowledge that *p*, it cannot become better purely as knowledge that *p*. Not even by becoming better supported could it improve *qua* knowledge that *p*.” (Hetherington 2011, 7) Thus, “knowledge cannot fluctuate in quality as knowledge. It can only be – or not

be. *Qua* knowledge, it can only be present or absent. It cannot be more or less present or absent – even as, all the while, it is present.” (*Ibid*) The reason for this is that it simply sounds strange to say that one knows better or worse: **you either know something or you don’t**; there is no middle ground. Surely, we do frequently use sentences like ‘I know Peter better than I know Michael’, or ‘She knows geography better than history’. But these are loose understandings of the word ‘knowledge’. The first one refers to ‘being acquainted with’, while the second stands for ‘learnt better’. In the weighty, epistemological understanding of ‘knowledge’, it seems strange to say that you know better or worse.

But EC, at least on the present reading of the theory, **does not presuppose knowledge-gradualism.**²⁷ Relative to the context of attribution, a subject *S* either knows that *p*, or she does not: her justification either meets the standards of the context, or it does not; there is nothing in between. Gradualism – essential nevertheless for the contextualist theory – is a job taken by proto-knowledge. Indeed, one seems to be entitled to say ‘*S* proto-knows better that *p* in situation *a*, rather than in *b*’ or ‘*S* proto-knows better than *R* (that *p*)’, without any contradiction.²⁸

ii) Second, please notice that the second requirement mentioned at (3.2.4.) can be understood as a form of restricted-infallibility condition on the part of knowledge, a condition that does not apply to proto-knowledge as well.

What am I referring to here? As mentioned in (3.2.4.), EC presupposes that one’s justification has to meet the standards of a certain context, and eliminate all the relevant

²⁷ This fact is also acknowledged by Hetherington (2011, 62 – 65).

²⁸ If the context of the utterance of ‘*S* knows *p*’ is such that the subject needs a J_6 or higher level of justification, and if there are other contexts in which the subject needs only a J_3 or lower levels of justification, and the subject actually has a J_5 level of justification, then we might say that *S* does not know that *p*, given the current context of the utterer, but she does proto-know that *p*, irrespective of the utterer’s context. Thus, we can easily say that ‘*S* proto-knows better that *p*’, when she has a J_5 level of justification than when she has a J_3 level of justification.

alternatives to one's belief²⁹ (which are determined by the context of attribution), in order for one's belief to be called 'knowledge'. But this can be interpreted as a form of restricted-infallibility condition. Indeed, I noted in (2.2.3.) that knowledge-fallibilism is the thesis according to which a subject *S* can know *p* based on reason *r* even if *r* does not entail *p*. Knowledge infallibilism is then the thesis according to which *S* knows *p* based on reason *r* only if *r* entails *p*. This can be then translated in the following way: a subject *S* knows *p* based on reason *r* only if *r* eliminates all non-*p* possibilities. Now, as we have seen in the case of Lewis's contextualism (see (1.3.3.) above), this requirement can be contextualized such that 'all' refers not to all logical non-*p* possibilities that exist, but only to those that are relevant in the present context of attribution. And this is precisely what the second requirement in (3.2.4.) above says: one's justification (evidence, reason) has to eliminate all the (contextually determined) relevant alternatives, in order for the justified belief to be named 'knowledge'. I will call this restricted-infallibility condition '**contextual infallibilism**'.

For proto-knowledge, nevertheless, this condition does not have to hold in the present context of attribution. Proto-knowledge, given the way it was defined, assumes that a belief is contextually infallible according to at least one context of attribution; it need not be the current context, in order for that belief to be proto-knowledge. It therefore follows that, from this perspective, yet again, knowledge differs substantially from proto-knowledge. And, as I think it is already suspected, this is the crucial element in answering the puzzle with which I ended the previous chapter.

3.3.2. Step X. Let me finally note the highly complex notion of knowledge that springs out of these thoughts. According to this reading, knowledge should not be reduced to a justified and true belief on the part of the subject of knowledge, nor to an elusive entity hanging on the mood of the ascriber:

²⁹ Or meet any other knowledge requirement presupposed by EC (e.g. DeRose's sensitivity condition). I stick here, as noted, with Cohen's theory.

○ To know something **is not an act or a state of the subject**; the subject simply believes, more or less justified. In order to call her belief ‘knowledge’, there needs to be a context of attribution in which the sentence ‘S knows p’ is rendered true. From this point of view, then, knowledge is ephemeral, a flying label that appears and disappears at a blink of an eye.

○ But at the same time, to know **is a state of the subject**. Besides the contextual knowledge, which exists only relatively to an ascriber and his context, proto-knowledge is there, in the mind of the subject, irrespective of what people say about it. I mean irrespective with a limit; there needs to be at least one context in which the subject’s justification is considered adequate. From this point of view, then, knowledge is as stable as an embarrassing memory; once you recall it, it never disappears.

To sum it up: **knowledge is both in the mind of the subject and on the lips of the ascriber.**

*

Let us now see how this fresh reading of contextualism can shed a new light on our dealings with the skeptic, and how it can answer the objections presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 4. – Accommodating the Skeptic

I presented, in the previous chapter, what I take to be a fresh reading of contextualism. According to this reading, what counts for EC is not only the fact that knowledge sentences change their truth value in respect to particular contexts of attribution, but also, and even more importantly, the fact that the subject's justified (and presumably true) belief remains the same. I called this belief 'proto-knowledge', and I claimed that this proto-knowledge can be attributed to agents even in the contexts in which their justification does not meet the contextual standards – with the condition that this justification is proper and meets at least one possible context.

In this chapter I want to further explore these claims, and see how this fresh reading of EC can help us in convincing the objectors that, in fact, EC does provide a strong answer to the skeptic. In order to do that, I will first discuss whether this reading can be used for other contextualist theories than Cohen's, exploring, in the meantime, further details of the reading – especially the way it explains Lewis's alleged infallibilism. I will then directly engage with the skeptical puzzle, showing how this new reading of EC provides a slightly different approach to the issue. While doing this, I will try to give a full response to the two objections presented in chapter 2, according to which EC is not a proper solution to skepticism, either because it is only a semantic thesis, or because it misconstrues the skeptic. The new understanding of Lewis's infallibilism will be of great help at this point. At the end, I will discuss several possible objections to my proposed reading of EC, and to its alleged resolution of the skeptical puzzle.

4.1. Can we generalize?

Let me recapitulate the 10 steps of the new proposed reading of EC (in relation to Cohen's contextualist theory):

- I. Justification is gradational
- II. Justified beliefs are gradational (relative to their justification)
- III. Justified true beliefs are gradational
- IV. Justified true beliefs remain the same irrespective of whether they are called ‘knowledge’ or not.
- V. There is a special relation between having a justified true belief (on the part of the subject), and calling that justified true belief ‘knowledge’ (on the part of the attributer). The justified true belief can therefore be called ‘proto-knowledge’.
- VI. The justified true belief can be called ‘proto-knowledge’ in a context irrespective of the fact that it is also called ‘knowledge’ in that context.
- VII. The requirement for a belief to be called ‘proto-knowledge’ is that it is called ‘knowledge’ in at least one possible context, not necessarily the actual one. Thus, not all justified true beliefs are proto-knowledge.
- VIII. Proto-knowledge is a form of knowledge: ‘context-neutral knowledge’
- IX. Proto-knowledge is gradational and fallible, while knowledge is absolute (non-gradational) and contextually infallible.
- X. In the end, knowledge is not only ‘on the lips of the ascriber’, but also ‘in the heart of the subject’. And there it remains stable as proto-knowledge.

Two substantive conclusions are to be drawn from this reading:

A. The justified true belief which is called ‘knowledge’ in at least one context of attribution has a special epistemic status, which is different from the status of a simple justified true belief. This is the reason why I call the former belief ‘proto-knowledge’.

B. Proto-knowledge, being a justified true belief, is gradational and fallible. Knowledge differs from this in substantial ways.

4.1.1. DeRose and Lewis. Let us now see whether these results apply to other contextualist theories than Cohen's.

To begin with, most of the contextualist theories do not use an internalist concept of justification in order to cash out the epistemic support a belief needs in order to be called 'knowledge'. Therefore, (I) above cannot be applied to all contextualist theories. But this is exactly why I proposed to gradually differentiate beliefs, and not only justification. Surely, the language will change, but I believe the ideas remain the same:

DeRose claims that, in order for an attributer to truthfully attribute knowledge to a subject, the subject's epistemic position has to meet the standards of the context of attribution. But this already implies (and DeRose explicitly says it in 1995, 29) that the subject's epistemic position is gradational. One can have a stronger or weaker epistemic position concerning a belief, and that epistemic position does not have to be cashed out only in terms of internal justification. To resume our parking lot example: we might say that, although the security guard is quite **reliable**, he might be less reliable than the surveillance cameras. But then again, even *seeing the tapes* with your own eyes is **less reliable** than *seeing the car* with your own eyes, or than seeing and touching and smelling it. Reliability, therefore, comes in degrees. DeRose himself uses the semantics of possible worlds and sensitivity in order to capture the gradational nature of one's epistemic position: the epistemic position is determined, sensitively, by how far it is, from the actual world, the closest possible world where $\neg p$ implies Bp . The **further** it is, the **stronger** is S 's epistemic position in respect to p (DeRose 1995, 29 – 35).

But if this is the case, then we can simply replace 'justification' in (I) above with 'epistemic position', and claim instead that one can have a **stronger or weaker epistemic position** concerning a belief. In other words, the belief itself can be stronger or weaker epistemically supported: it can be stronger or weaker, relative to its epistemic support (II).

And, if the belief is true, then a well-supported true belief is gradational, relative to its epistemic support (III). The rest of the reading (IV – X) is of course unaffected by these preliminary changes: a well-supported belief that is possible to be called ‘knowledge’ in at least one context, should be called ‘proto-knowledge’ in all contexts (V, VI, and VII); but then, proto-knowledge is a form of knowledge – context-neutral, gradual, and fallible (VIII, IX). And, finally, this means that proto-knowledge is the stable component of knowledge (IV, X).

Lewis’s theory, might be thought, is harder to fit into this scheme. But it is not. Surely, Lewis denies that there is any internal justification. He construes knowledge in terms of relevant alternatives that need to be eliminated by one’s evidence, and says that those alternatives are either relevant or not, depending on what the attributer ignores or not. But then again, we can envisage a scale of beliefs, constructed according to how many alternatives one’s evidence can eliminate – if they are not properly ignored. In other words, even if we are not allowed by Lewis to construct a scale of justified beliefs, we can still **differentiate between beliefs according to how many un-ignored alternatives the agent’s evidence eliminates**. E.g.: Sylvie being in front of the car in the parking lot eliminates more alternatives (to the belief that the car is there) than Sylvie’s looking at the cameras; the former further eliminates the alternative possibility in which the cameras are deceiving (because maybe they are broken), such that they do not actually show what is happening in the parking lot. The belief formed in the former way, therefore, is epistemically stronger than the belief formed in the latter way. And that puts us on exactly the same track as before: true beliefs whose relevant alternatives are eliminated can be stronger or weaker, relative to how many such alternatives are eliminated by one’s evidence; these true beliefs are stable, and they can be called ‘proto-knowledge’ if... etc.

I thus came to the conclusion that my proposed reading of EC adjusts to any of the three versions of EC analyzed here, irrespective of what the particular theory takes knowledge or justification to be – or if it even accepts justification as a component of knowledge. No matter if justification is construed as an internalist notion, or an externalist one, EC is a thesis about the context-sensitivity of a term, ‘knowledge’, which maintains that, besides the fact that the truth conditions and truth values of knowledge sentences change with context, something really remains the same, and that is proto-knowledge. Proto-knowledge, in this sense, is the key of understanding EC.

I now want to discuss, before seeing how this reading deals with the skeptical argument, whether Lewis’s contextualism still denies fallibilism, according to this reading.

4.1.2. Lewis and infallibilism. I have argued, in (3.3.1.), that infallibilism can be understood in two ways:

- $\alpha.$ S knows p based on reason r only if r entails p .
- $\beta.$ S knows p based on reason r only if r eliminates all non- p possibilities.

As shown in Chapter 3, (β) here can be restricted by noticing that ‘all’ in the definition refers not to all logical non- p possibilities that exist, but only to those that are relevant in the present context of attribution. Sure enough, this restricted understanding of infallibilism is precisely the one defended by Lewis: “subject S knows proposition p iff p holds in every possibility left uneliminated by p ’s evidence; equivalently, iff S ’s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not- p .” (1996, 551)

But, and this is the crucial element is sorting out Lewis’s controversial claims, this *contextual infallibilism* – as I called it in (3.3.1.) – is not the only or the most important way in which infallibilism in general can be understood. Indeed, according to the unrestricted understanding of infallibilism presented in (α), Lewis is **not a knowledge-infallibilist**: being a contextualist, he acknowledges that there are contexts in which a belief is construed as

being knowledge, even if the evidence that one has for that belief does not entail the truth of the belief: Lewis would claim that Sylvie's boss is right in saying that Sylvie knows that her car is in the parking lot, even if Sylvie's evidence does not entail the truth of that belief. In fact, Lewis is a knowledge-fallibilist even according to (β), if the domain of 'all' (or 'every', by his definition) is not restricted, as he ferociously tries to convince us, to the context of the utterer of the knowledge sentence. Allowing him, nevertheless, this move, we can still claim that Lewis, even if a context-knowledge-infallibilist, is not an unrestricted-knowledge-infallibilist, as this position is defined in (α) above.

Furthermore, Lewis is also a fallibilist about proto-knowledge, irrespective of how we define knowledge-fallibilism (as the denial of (α) or of restricted / contextualized (β)). Given that a belief is proto-knowledge even if it is not knowledge in the present context of attribution, it follows that the belief need not be contextually knowledge-infallible in the present context (or, for that matter, unrestrictedly infallible), in order for it to be called 'knowledge'; it has to be contextually knowledge-infallible in at least one context of attribution. Lewis's contextualism, therefore, does not commit itself to a full-blown infallibilism, as it might be suggested by his provocative remarks; it only posits a form of **contextual-infallibilism**.

4.2. Solving the skeptical puzzle

4.2.1. The general solution. Let me recapitulate what we gained thus far. Given the reading of contextualism presented in chapter 3, and summarized at the beginning of the current chapter, I concluded that:

A. The well supported true belief (irrespective of how the epistemic support is conceived), which is called 'knowledge' in at least one context of attribution, has a special epistemic status, a status that is different from the one of a simple justified true belief. This is the reason why I call the former belief 'proto-knowledge'.

B. Proto-knowledge, being a justified true belief, is gradational and fallible. Knowledge, given its peculiar nature, depending both on the subject's epistemic position, and on the attributer's context of evaluation, is neither gradational, nor (contextually) fallible – although it is fallible in the unrestricted, non-contextual sense.

But if this is the case, then the skeptical puzzle presented in (1.1.) can be translated in the following way:

1* I proto-know that I have two hands

2* If I do not proto-know that I am not a BIV, then I do not proto-know that I have two hands

3* I do not proto-know that I am not a BIV

Now, given the way I defined proto-knowledge (as the well supported true belief considered to be knowledge in at least one context of attribution), it follows that (3*) above is simply false: we do know, by ordinary standards, that we are not BIVs. When I turn on my TV set, when I eat my cereals, when I walk in the park: in all these contexts I take it as granted – and the contextualist says I am right in doing so (Cohen 1988, 113; DeRose 1995, 50; Neta 2000, 675) – that I am not a BIV.³⁰ Therefore, if there is at least one context of attribution in which it is correct to say that I know that I am not a BIV, it means that **even in the epistemological context, when dealing face in face with the skeptic** – as, presumably, the above puzzle makes possible – **the sentence 'I proto-know that I am not a BIV' is true.**

³⁰ Cohen says that we know – in ordinary contexts – that we are not BIVs, because believing that we are not BIVs is an 'intrinsically rational belief' (1988, 113), that belongs to a 'non-evidential rationality' (1999, 77), and which fulfils the needs of day to day contexts of attribution. And it seems indeed plausible to say, given the ordinary epistemic standards by which we live, that our daily justification for believing that we are not BIVs is good enough for us to claim that we know we are not BIVs in ordinary contexts. Not being a BIV is a hypothesis that – although not irrefutable – is confirmed over and over again by our daily dealings.

In this way, (3*) above is rendered false and contextualism is assured to offer a straightforward Moorean response to the skeptic, even in the epistemological context.

4.2.2. Answering the objections. It is now, I think, apparent how we can deal with the objections presented in Chapter 2.

i) We have noticed, in (2.1.), that the general contextualist answer to the skeptical puzzle is not seen very well. The main problem with this answer is that it does not take a proper Moorean stance in the confrontation with the skeptic. Being only a metalinguistic theory, EC bears no consequences, the objector claims, on the real epistemological question of whether we have any knowledge of the external world or not. Cohen's answer to this type of objection (acknowledging the need for a Moorean stance, but claiming that such a thing is possible only in ordinary contexts), seems to be insufficient to calm the objector's unsettledness with EC. I believe that we can now offer a better answer to this objection. It is indeed the case that we cannot attribute knowledge in skeptical / epistemological contexts, given the high standards imposed by those contexts. It is not the case, nevertheless, that we cannot have a Moorean stance, even in skeptical contexts, concerning our factual beliefs about the world. If we acknowledge that there is a stable component of knowledge – proto-knowledge – one that does not change from context to context (as long as there is at least one possible context in which it is considered knowledge), then it follows that **we can attribute proto-knowledge concerning factual things even in the epistemological contexts**. I, for example, can tell to my skeptical opponent that, while she is indeed right in claiming that my epistemic position is not irrefutable, and therefore it is not strong enough in order to meet her demands – I have to admit to her that I do not know that I have hands, or that I am not a BIV – I still have a strong epistemic position, one that allows me (and others) to attribute knowledge to myself in the more mundane contexts. Therefore, she is wrong in taking away all the epistemic import of my beliefs. Even if I do not possess full knowledge according to the present context of

attribution, my epistemic position is still a formidable one: the hypothesis that I have hands and that I am not a BIV was confirmed quite nicely, over and over again, until now. Therefore, I am quite confident with these claims, and I can assert to proto-know them, even if I have to admit that, given the current skeptical context, they do not amount to knowledge.³¹

In the end, to the question ‘do we or do we not know anything?’ we can answer, with a Moorean stance: ‘we proto-know a lot’.

ii) The second objection to the classical reading of contextualism (2.2.) is that EC misconstrues what the skeptical puzzle is all about. It is not the case, the objectors claim, that skepticism is about how high one’s justification needs to be in order to meet the standards of a given context of attribution, but about whether there can be any justification for beliefs about the external world in the first place. And, as Cohen acknowledges, EC lacks the resources to provide a proper answer to this form of the skeptical argument. But I believe that Cohen is mistaken. Even if EC is indeed only a metalinguistic theory about the use of a word, it presupposes a theory that can help in dealing in a straightforward manner with what was called ‘full-blooded skepticism’. As shown in (2.2.3), fallibilism answers the question ‘how good our evidence is?’ by pointing to the fact that it does not have to be irrefutable in order to be

³¹ The same works for the car in the parking lot case: Sylvie’s brother can admit, even in the skeptical context imposed by his remarks, that, although his sister does not know, given her current epistemic position, that the car is in the parking lot, her belief still has a certain epistemic weight. Thus, even if he says that he cannot attribute knowledge to Sylvie, because of her fallible epistemic position, he can admit that her reasons for believing that the car is in the parking lot are not totally stupid or irrelevant. Even he can recognize that looking at the cameras is a kind of justification (it has a sort of epistemic relevance), although not a sufficient one – or at least not sufficient for the high standards imposed by him. Therefore, it is plausible to say that even Sylvie’s brother could admit, in his own skeptical context, that, although Sylvie does not know that her car is in the parking lot, she proto-knows it.

considered good evidence.³² Therefore, **fallibilism represents a first step in a possible response to the full-blooded skeptic**. It was argued (2.2.4.), nonetheless, that fallibilism is not a thesis that is shared by all contextualist theories, and therefore it cannot be part of the general bare contextualist answer to the skeptic. The main obstacle, it was claimed, is Lewis's construal of EC. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown (in (3.3.1) and (4.1.2.)), that Lewis's alleged infallibilism is not an unrestricted infallibilism, but a form of contextual-infallibilism and proto-knowledge fallibilism, positions that do not contravene with the fallibilist thesis. It seems apparent to me, then, that **EC does have the resources to answer the skeptical puzzle, even when discussing full-blooded skepticism**.

*

The most remarkable feature of this solution to the skeptical puzzle is that it acknowledges the strength of the skeptical puzzle without claiming that skepticism robs us of our epistemic coziness.³³ Dogmatic relativism – the most threatening effect of skepticism – is refuted by EC, precisely because the theory presupposes that there are epistemic differences between our beliefs (as shown in Chapter 3), and that our justifications (or however we desire to call the epistemic support needed for knowledge) are good enough, even if they are not irrefutable (fallibilism).

It then follows that EC does succeed in accommodating skepticism, even if, per se, it is only a linguistic theory about the use of a word.

³² As I note above, in my dispute with the skeptic, the hypothesis that I have hands was confirmed quite nicely over the time, and I can thus trust it, even if it is not irrefutable.

³³ As noted above, even Sylvie's brother can recognize that looking at the cameras is not completely stupid or irrelevant for Sylvie's belief that the car is in the parking lot. It is just that, Sylvie's brother claims, this justification should be strengthened by a better type of epistemic support.

4.3. Objections

I now want to tackle some of the more pressing objections to the view presented in this thesis.

4.3.1. Objection 1. One first concern with this proposal is that **fallibilism is not sufficient for properly answering the full-blooded skeptic**. As noted by Cohen (2001, 96), full-blooded skepticism seems to be first and foremost a skeptical position about justification. EC, again, is only a linguistic theory about the use of the word ‘knowledge’. Even if it presupposes knowledge-fallibilism, EC does not provide a full answer to the full-blooded skeptic.

And indeed, I agree with this objection. Fallibilism, as noted already, is only a first step towards a proper answer to this type of skepticism. A full response would need to discuss the structure of justification (or whatever counts as the epistemic support of a belief) and the relation between this justification and knowledge. But these are topics in substantive theories of knowledge and justification, presupposed in no way by bare contextualism. Fallibilism, the thesis that is indeed presupposed by all EC theories, **is only a step** in the bigger strategy of dealing with skepticism.

4.3.2. Objection 2. Another worry, this time concerning the notion of proto-knowledge, is that EC, under the present reading at least, presupposes that we possess proto-knowledge even if our epistemic position is extremely weak (but good enough for the lowest context of attribution). In other words, EC assumes **easy knowledge** and proto-knowledge: an always unwelcomed result.

The answer to this objection is two-folded. First, notice that knowledge and proto-knowledge are not that easy to get. For a belief to be considered knowledge, it has to be:

- Justified and true (however we construe justification)
- Justified in a proper way (this is the externalist, anti-Gettier condition)
- Justified in such a way that there is at least one context in which the justification eliminates the relevant alternatives.

It seems to me that these are quite **redoubtable requirements**, not so easily met. But suppose that there are cases of true beliefs that, even if justified in a very lousy manner, they still meet the above requirements. E.g.: Sarah believes – with truth – that her husband is still alive after his plane disappeared in the Pacific Ocean, because a fortune teller tells her that this is the case. Is this proto-knowledge? Suppose that the belief is evaluated in a very low-stake context, such that, apparently, it meets the extremely low standards of the context. Suppose further that Sarah’s justification is proper (although this is highly improbable). We have to conclude, then, that Sarah’s belief is knowledge in at least one context of attribution, and it is therefore proto-knowledge in all contexts. But what is the problem with that? We can still differentiate – given that proto-knowledge is gradational – between different grades of proto-knowledge, such that, in real practice, Sarah’s type of belief is acknowledged as being epistemically very weak. There are quite few contexts in which Sarah’s belief would count as knowledge. Therefore, Sarah’s belief being (a weak) proto-knowledge does not threaten our epistemological doings: **gradualism is here to save us against easy proto-knowledge.**

4.3.3. Objection 3. A more general objection is that **EC seems superfluous**. Why not stick with a simple Moorean stance? What is the difference between the position claimed by this thesis and the one of someone who calls my proto-knowledge simply ‘knowledge’?

Let us suppose that, indeed, what I called proto-knowledge is simple knowledge, and we can ascribe plain knowledge even in the skeptical contexts: in my dialogue with the skeptic, I would not grant him that I do not know factual things about the world in the present skeptical

context. I would push my justification more and more, until he recognizes that my justification, although not irrefutable, is proper for some kind of knowledge, even if not for the full-blown version of knowledge. This is, I believe, the usual Moorean stance: accepting fallibilism, we can claim to know even in the contexts in which we are bombarded with skeptical scenarios. The problem with this proposal is that it presupposes levels of knowledge. As I have mentioned, I can push my justification in the debate with the skeptic more and more, only with the cost of him recognizing that I have a kind of **low knowledge**; he could never admit (and neither do I, I suppose) that I possess the highest degree of knowledge. But the issue here is that, as shown in (3.3.1.), **knowledge gradualism simply sounds wrong**. As Dretske puts it (1981, 363): “Factual knowledge is absolute. It is like being pregnant: an all or nothing affair. One person cannot be more pregnant, or pregnant better than someone else.” It therefore follows that the proposed reading of EC presented in this thesis has the advantage of not committing itself to such an unwelcomed view as knowledge-gradualism.

4.3.4. Objection 4. A similar possible criticism of EC being superfluous is related to fallibilism. Why should we not stick only with **fallibilism** – the objector might ask – why should we commit ourselves to such a debatable theory as EC?

The answer is straightforward: contextualism, even if only a metalinguistic theory, helps us with an impressive array of problems: besides giving a type of Moorean answer to the skeptic (allowing for the attribution of proto-knowledge even in the skeptical contexts), and showing what the mechanism behind the alleged gradualism of knowledge is (in fact not knowledge is gradational, but proto-knowledge), EC – under the present reading, at least – also helps us deal with the problem of concessive knowledge attributions (CKAs, for short), one of the biggest issues for fallibilism in general. Indeed, as noted at the end of Chapter 2

(2.2.4.), CKAs are statements of the form ‘*S* knows *p*, but *p* might not be true’ (Rysiew 2001; Daugherty and Rysiew 2009,). The problem is that it sounds strange to utter this type of sentences: how could we coherently say (Littlejohn 2011, 603) that ‘he knows, but he hasn’t eliminated all possibilities of error’? The contextualist answer to this problem is to say that the two parts of these sentences – before and after the comma – are asserted in different contexts of attribution. One cannot assert, in the same context – given what I called ‘contextual infallibilism’ in (3.3.1) – that a subject knows, but she does not eliminate all possibilities of error (where ‘all’ is defined contextually). **CKA problem**, which is one of the crucial problems of fallibilism, is therefore answered by acknowledging that knowledge is, in fact, contextually infallible. Thus, EC is shown to have an advantage over simple fallibilism.

Concluding Remark

I started this thesis by claiming that there is something Mephistophellian about skepticism. I then got to the conclusion that this something is more than just the feeling that knowledge might be unreachable. The really daunting effect of skepticism, I claimed, is its effect: relativism. Epistemic contextualism is a theory that can help us get rid of relativism, without definitively refuting skepticism. The beauty of contextualism is precisely the fact that it acknowledges the strength of all positions, without directly refuting any of them.

Nevertheless, quite many epistemologists are resisting this seductiveness, claiming that skepticism can be dealt with only directly, either by refuting it, or by endorsing it. The general lesson – an important one – extracted from their remarks, is that contextualism imposes on us a too elusive feature of knowledge, a feature that does not exist in reality. And, if they are right, this extreme elusiveness (supported by Lewis, for example), might indeed threaten the beneficial effects of contextualism. As Feldman, Klein, Kornblith, Bach, and the others argue,³⁴ it might be the case that, being seduced by its elegant appearance, we forget that contextualism is not a proper theory of knowledge, and it does not offer a full response to the skeptic. It might offer, if it was the case that it contains certain presuppositions, like fallibilism, but it seems that fallibilism, at least, is not shared by all contextualist theorists.

I tried in this thesis to show that this wrong. Fallibilism **is** presupposed by all contextualist theories, and contextualism **does** offer a proper answer to skepticism. EC provides us with a straightforward answer to the skeptic, because i) proto-knowledge – defined as the justified true belief acknowledged as knowledge in at least one context of attribution – can be attributed even without knowledge; and it can be so attributed even in the skeptical context; and ii) all EC theories presuppose a sort of fallibilism, and this fallibilism is

³⁴ See section (2.2.)

an essential element of the proper answer to what was called ‘full-blooded skepticism’. Thus, the skeptical concern is answered fully and properly by the contextualist position.

But what is more interesting about contextualism is that it offers us not only a fresh solution to the skeptic, accommodating its insights, but it also settles important elements in our epistemology. I hope to have shown that EC has the capacity to explain why we feel so reluctant in accepting knowledge-gradualism or knowledge-fallibilism. It seems natural, the contextualist shows, that knowledge presupposes infallibility. But we are not talking here about unrestricted infallibility, threatened with extinction by the skeptic, but about contextual infallibility: the requirement that one’s epistemic position rules out all the relevant alternatives to a given belief (where the relevance is determined contextually). The same with knowledge- gradualism: it is not knowledge that comes in degrees, but proto-knowledge. By understanding this, we avoid the unwelcomed result of claiming that one can know better *a* than *b*.

I have to conclude, then, that, in my opinion, this fresh reading of contextualism comes with quite many benefits. In the end, I tend to be less frightened by skepticism, if I can make sense of the mechanism that brings it about – epistemic contextualism being of great help in this matter. It seems, then, that skepticism should not be considered as evil as we are used to, and, rather than refute it, maybe we should simply accommodate it.

References

- Annis, David B., 1978, "A Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(3): 213–219.
- Bach, Kent, 2005, "The Emperor's New 'Knows'", in G. Preyer, and G. Peter (eds.), *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth*, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 51–89
- Bach, Kent, 2010, 'Knowledge In and out of context', in J. K. Campbell, M. O'Rourke, and H. S. Silverstein (eds.) *Knowledge and Skepticism*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Blackburn, Simon, 2005, *Truth: A Guide to the Perplexed*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blome-Tillmann, Michael, 2009, "Knowledge and Presuppositions", *Mind*, 118(470): 241–294.
- Capellen, Herman and Ernest Lepore, 2005, *Insensitive Semantics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Cohen, Stewart, 1988, "How to be a Fallibilist", *Philosophical Perspectives*, Volume 2: 91–123.
- Cohen, Stewart, 1998, "Contextualist Solutions to Epistemological Problems: Skepticism, Gettier, and the Lottery", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 76(2): 289–306.
- Cohen Stewart, 1999, "Contextualism, Skepticism, and The Structure of Reasons", *Philosophical Perspectives 13: Epistemology*: 57–89.
- Cohen, Stewart, 2001, "Contextualism Defended: Comments on Richard Feldman's 'Skeptical Problems, Contextualist Solutions'", *Philosophical Studies*, 103: 87–98.
- Cohen, Stewart, 2005, "Contextualism Defended" and "Contextualism Defended Some More", in Steup and Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, Malden MA: Blackwell: 56–62, 67–71.
- Conee, Earl, 2005, "Contextualism Contested" and "Contextualism Contested Some More", in Steup and Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, Malden MA: Blackwell: 47–56, 62–66.
- DeRose, Keith, 1992, "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52(4): 913–929.
- DeRose, Keith, 1995, "Solving the Skeptical Problem", *The Philosophical Review*, 104(1): 1–52.
- DeRose, Keith, 1999, "Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense," in J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, Malden MA: 185–203.

- DeRose, Keith, 2004, "Single Scoreboard Semantics", *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 119, No. 1/2: 1–21.
- DeRose, Keith, 2009, *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context: Vol. 1*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dougherty, Trent and Patrick Rysiew, 2009, "Fallibilism, Epistemic Possibility, and Concessive Knowledge Attributions", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 78(1): 123–132.
- Dretske, Fred, 1970, "Epistemic Operators", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 67(24): 1007–1023.
- Dretske, Fred, 1981, "The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge", *Philosophical Studies*, 40: 363–378.
- Fantl, Jeremy, and Matthew McGrath, 2009, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feldman, Richard, 1999, "Contextualism and Skepticism", *Philosophical Perspectives 1: Epistemology*: 91–114.
- Feldman, Richard, 2001, "Skeptical Problems, Contextualist Solutions", *Philosophical Studies*, 103: 61–85. (A revised version of Feldman 1999.).
- Feldman, Richard, 2004, "Comments on DeRose's 'Single Scoreboard Semantics'", *Philosophical Studies*, 119(1–2): 23–33.
- Fogelin, Robert, 1999, "Contextualism and Skepticism", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13: 91–114.
- Goldman, Alvin, 1976, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73: 771–791.
- Hawthorne, John, 2004, *Knowledge and Lotteries*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hetherington, Stephen, 2005, "Fallibilism", *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/f/fallibil.htm>
- Hetherington, Stephen, 2011, *How to Know: A Practicalist Conception of Knowledge*, West Sussex, United Kingdom; Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Heller, Mark, 1999, "Relevant Alternatives and Closure", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 77(2): 196–208.
- Klein, Peter., 2000, "Contextualism and the Real Nature of Academic Skepticism", *Philosophical Issues*, 10: 108–16.

- Klein, Peter, 2005, "Skepticism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/skepticism/>
- Kornblith, Hilary, 2000, "The Contextualist Evasion of Epistemology", *Philosophical Issues*, 10: 24–32.
- Kyburg, Henry E., 1961, *Probability and the Logic of Rational Belief*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Lewis, David K., 1979, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game", *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8: 339–359.
- Lewis, David K., 1996, "Elusive Knowledge", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74(4): 549–567.
- Littlejohn, Clayton, 2011, "Concessive Knowledge Attributions and Fallibilism", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LXXXIII, No. 3: 603–619.
- Ludlow, Peter, 2005, "Contextualism and the New Linguistic Turn in Epistemology", in Preyer, G., and G. Peter, eds., 2005, *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth*, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 11–50.
- Moore, G. E., 1993, *Commonplace Book 1919–1953*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press.
- Neta, Ram, 2002, "S knows that P," *Noûs*, 36(4): 663–681.
- Neta, Ram, 2003, "Contextualism and the Problem of the External World", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66(1): 1–31.
- Pritchard, Duncan, 2002, "Resurrecting the Moorean Response to the Skeptic", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 10: 283–307
- Pritchard, Duncan, 2009, "Safety-Based Epistemology: Whither Now?", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 34: 33–46.
- Rieber, Steven, 1998, "Skepticism and Contrastive Explanation", *Noûs*, 32(2): 189–204.
- Rysiew, Patrick, 2001, "The Context-Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions", *Noûs*, 35(4): 477–514.
- Rysiew, Patrick, 2011, "Epistemic Contextualism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/contextualism-epistemology/>.
- Schaffer, Jonathan, 2005, "What Shifts? Thresholds, Standards, or Alternatives?", in Preyer and Peter (eds.), *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth*, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 115–130.

- Schiffer, Stephen, 1996, “Contextualist Solutions to Skepticism”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 96: 317–333.
- Sosa, Ernest, 1999, “How to Defeat Opposition to Moore”, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13: 141–153.
- Sosa, Ernest, 2000, “Skepticism and Contextualism.” *Philosophical Issues 10, Skepticism*: 1–18.
- Sosa, Ernest, 2004, “Replies”, in Greco (ed.), *Ernest Sosa and His Critics*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell: 275–325.
- Sosa, Ernest, 2007, *A Virtue Epistemology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stanley, Jason, 2005, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Stine, Gail C., 1976, “Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure”. *Philosophical Studies*, 29: 249–261.
- Turri, John and Ori Friedman, forthcoming, 'Winners and losers in the folk epistemology of lotteries', in James Beebe (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Epistemology*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Unger, Peter, 1984, *Philosophical Relativity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Williams, Micahel, 1991, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Skepticism*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Williams, Michael, 2001, “Contextualism, Externalism and Epistemic Standards.” *Philosophical Studies*, 103: 1-23.
- Williamson, Timothy, 2000, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.