

## The Contextualist Evasion of Epistemology

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Keith DeRose's contextualism offers both good news and bad news for the skeptic.<sup>1</sup> The good news is that when the skeptic utters the words, "I don't know anything about the external world, and neither do you," the skeptic is making a true claim. The bad news is that when the anti-skeptic utters the words, "I do know a great deal about the external world and so does almost everyone else," the anti-skeptic is making a true claim as well. Put somewhat differently: the claim the skeptic makes is irrelevant to the claim the anti-skeptic makes.

Ernest Sosa<sup>2</sup> offers both good news and bad news for Keith DeRose's contextualism. The good news is that the semantic thesis which DeRose offers about uses of the term 'knowledge' may be true. The bad news is that this semantic thesis is largely irrelevant to epistemological concerns.

My own sympathies here lie very much with Ernest Sosa. Indeed, I believe that Sosa is extremely charitable in his description of the epistemological import of DeRose's contextualism. I will thus attempt to reinforce some of the points which Sosa has made, and argue for a somewhat less cautious thesis: First, I believe

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that DeRose's contextualism is irrelevant to epistemology; and second, I believe that the semantic thesis which DeRose defends does not explain the phenomenon he seeks to explain.

#### 1. The skeptical worry

The skeptic—for example, Descartes' skeptic in the *First Meditation*—presents an argument which seems to show that, for all we know, there may be no external world. Because we cannot tell whether we are dreaming, or being deceived by a demon, we have no more reason to believe that the world is as we take it to be than that it is altogether different, or, indeed, that there is no such world at all. The conclusion of the skeptical argument is quite radical. It is not merely that we do not know anything at all about the external world. Rather, the skeptic's view about what we know is a consequence of his view about what we are justified in believing. According to the skeptic, we are no more justified in believing that there is an external world than that there isn't. Indeed, take any two propositions about the external world: for example, the proposition that I am standing here now reading a paper about skepticism and the claim that I am now standing in the middle of a road with a very large truck heading straight toward me. If the skeptical argument works at all, it shows that I have no more reason to believe the first of these two claims than the second. The reason I don't know anything about the external world, according to the skeptic, is not that I have a small degree of justification for my beliefs when knowledge requires a larger degree of justification. Rather, the skeptic claims that I have no degree of justification whatever for my claims about the external world. None. Let us call this view *Full-Blooded Skepticism*.

Surely what is so disturbing about the skeptical argument is this suggestion that there is no more reason to believe any proposition about the external world than any other. Pretheoretically, we believe that some claims are more reasonable than others. For example, we think it is more reasonable to believe that human beings walked on the moon than that the pictures which seemed to show Neil Armstrong strolling there were really a product of a

massive conspiracy involving Hollywood, the CIA and the White House; we think it more reasonable to believe that the earth is roughly spherical than that it is flat. If the skeptic agreed with us that there are differences in degree between the extent of justification which we have for various claims about the external world, but simply denied that we ever reach some very high standard required for knowledge, then skepticism would be a much less interesting claim. Indeed, imagine a skeptic who says the following: "Yes, I agree that it is far more reasonable to believe that you are reading a paper in Oviedo than that you are standing in the middle of a road; the first is far better justified than the second. More than this, when it comes to deciding what to believe, there are significant differences in the degrees of justification for various propositions about the external world, and in a large class of cases, it is entirely unproblematic as to what one should believe. I simply deny that the level of justification one reaches in any of these cases is sufficient to call the resulting beliefs cases of knowledge." This is not, of course, the skepticism of Descartes' *First Meditation*; it is, instead, a much more modest and less exciting form of skepticism. Let us call this view *High Standards Skepticism*.

What should we say to the High Standards Skeptic? On the one hand, I think it is quite natural to suggest that this skeptic has a deeply deviant view about the nature of knowledge, or at least, about how the term 'knowledge' should be used. But in practice, if confronted with such a skeptic, it would probably be wise simply to capitulate. "Let us use the term 'knowledge' as you do," I would say. Nothing much hangs on this. Since the skeptic agrees that we can make meaningful and important distinctions about how well justified we are in various claims, and agrees with us about which claims we should believe and act upon, nothing much turns on it. It is like dealing with the Vermonter who insists that he won't say that it is cold outside unless it is at least 25 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. If he recognizes that there are important distinctions to be made in temperatures above minus 25, and that these distinctions have a bearing on how one should interact with the world, then the only difference between him and us is a bit of charming linguistic eccentricity. It would, however, be altogether different if this Vermonter thought that temperatures above minus 25 were all on a par, and had no differential physical effects. This latter character is more than a linguistic eccentric; he is making substantive claims about the world, claims which would be tremendously important if they were true.

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Now my worry about DeRose's contextualism can be put quite succinctly: DeRose responds only to the High Standards Skeptic, the skeptic who is an analog of my charmingly eccentric Vermonter and who acknowledges the importance and accuracy of substantive epistemological distinctions we wish to make. But this is a wholly trivial and uninteresting position. On the other hand, contextualism does nothing to address the Full-Blooded Skeptic, the skeptic who wishes to insist that all propositions about the external world are epistemologically on a par. But it is this latter skeptic who is making an historically important and philosophically interesting claim. If skepticism is a position we need to worry about, it is Full-Blooded Skepticism, not High Standards Skepticism, which should concern us. The skeptical problem DeRose's contextualism addresses is simply uninteresting from an epistemological point of view.<sup>3</sup>

DeRose does have a response to Full-Blooded Skepticism, but it does not involve his contextualism. DeRose, in addition to being a contextualist, is an externalist about justification. And DeRose's treatment of what he calls the "strength of one's epistemic position" is a familiar externalist account. On such a view, the skeptic is simply mistaken when he claims that the conditions for knowledge cannot ever be fulfilled; he is mistaken in thinking that in a situation of the sort we ordinarily take ourselves to be in when looking at a table (in standard conditions with properly functioning perceptual and cognitive equipment), we are no better justified in believing that we are looking at a table than that we are looking at a toaster. The externalist account of justification, or strength of epistemic position, is a familiar and controversial one. It may or may not be right. I myself am very sympathetic with externalism. But it is important to recognize that it is the externalist part of DeRose's view which is doing the work in combatting Full-Blooded Skepticism. Contextualism does no work here.

So what work is DeRose's contextualism doing?

## 2. The dialectic of skeptical argument

DeRose's contextualism is designed to explain certain features of the dialectic of skeptical argument. DeRose is keenly aware of the way in which the skeptic is able to entrap even an anti-skeptic, seemingly forcing him to a skeptical conclusion. It is our suscep-

tibility to skeptical argument which DeRose wishes to account for, without at the same time simply allowing that the skeptic is right and the anti-skeptic mistaken. DeRose is surely right that the appeal of skeptical argument requires some explanation, and any view about knowledge which can explain this appeal has an advantage over views which leave it unexplained.

On DeRose's view, skeptical argument makes salient certain possibilities which were not previously salient, for example, the possibility that one is dreaming, or that one is a brain in a vat. Because these possibilities are now salient to both conversational partners, there is some pressure to raise the standards for knowledge attribution, indeed, to raise them so high that knowledge becomes unattainable. It is important to recognize that on DeRose's view, the mentioning of skeptical possibilities does not automatically raise the standards for knowledge attribution; it merely creates some pressure in that direction, to which the otherwise anti-skeptical partner may or may not accede. This is, I believe, as it should be. In other cases, when our conversational partners attempt to change the topic of conversation, we need not always accede. Attempts to raise the standards for knowledge attribution, like attempts to change the topic of conversation, require the engagement of both conversational partners. Nevertheless, there is typically a temptation to go with the flow. If our conversational partner changes the topic from philosophy to the weather, we will ordinarily follow his lead. Similarly, when the skeptic raises the standards for knowledge attribution, according to DeRose, there is some temptation to accede to this new contextually set standard. And once we do that, the claims the skeptic makes, relative to this newly set standard, are simply true. DeRose thus accounts for our tendency to be pulled in by skeptical argument through an appeal to the pragmatics and dynamics of conversation. The anti-skeptic is not mistaken in what he says, when he says it. But the skeptic is not mistaken in what he says when he says it either.

Now as Stephen Schiffer has pointed out<sup>4</sup>, the story DeRose tells here about the semantics of knowledge attribution is not terribly plausible. Some words clearly have a semantics of the sort which DeRose claims for 'knowledge.' 'Cold' is such a word. What we count as cold depends on certain contextually set parameters. I may truly utter the words 'It's cold out' when it is 60 degrees Fahrenheit on a July day, and yet, when it reaches 60 degrees in mid-winter, I may say, with equal truth, "It isn't cold out today." There are contextual factors which determine, more or less, just

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how low the temperature has to be before we say that it is cold. But, as Schiffer notes, the reason DeRose's story about the semantics of 'knowledge' seems so implausible is that no one is misled by radical standards shifting in the case of words like 'cold.' If I comment that it is cold out when it is 60 degrees in July, and you make salient just how low the temperature can get in mid-winter in northern Alaska, I will not be tempted to take back what I said earlier. More than that, I would not now wonder whether it does ever really get cold during the summer. In the knowledge cases, skeptical argument does often prompt one to wonder whether knowledge is really attainable. The contextualist semantics DeRose proposes fails to explain why that should be the case.

So DeRose's contextualist semantics does not try to address the real skeptical worry, what I have called Full-Blooded Skepticism, and it does not succeed in explaining the dynamics of skeptical argument. Ironically, I believe that DeRose is in a position to make some headway on the problem he attempts to address, although the solution here, as far as it goes, will once again come from his externalism rather than his contextualism.

Even externalists must acknowledge that internalist intuitions about justification are extremely widespread. And if internalism about justification were indeed correct, then when the skeptic raises the possibility that we are all brains in vats, knowledge of the character of the external world would require that we have a non-question-begging argument to show that we are not brains in vats. As DeRose acknowledges, developing such an argument is, at a minimum, quite difficult. So the skeptic, in raising the possibility of various skeptical scenarios, thereby excites internalist intuitions in his interlocutor. And these internalist intuitions lead the interlocutor to suspect that knowledge of the external world is impossible because it is impossible to be justified on internalist grounds in believing anything about the external world in the face of skeptical possibilities. Now according to DeRose, internalism about justification is mistaken, in spite of the prevalence of internalist intuitions. So we have a ready diagnosis of the dialectic of skeptical argument deriving entirely from DeRose's externalism. And DeRose's commitment to externalism requires him in any case to regard internalist intuitions as deeply mistaken, even if they are deeply entrenched.

Now it would be nice to have an explanation for the prevalence of internalist intuitions, and this particular suggestion does not

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offer one. Stephen Schiffer has suggested that our ordinary concept of knowledge is just incoherent. That is certainly one of the possibilities; there are others as well. Ernest Sosa offers a rival account. But whatever the proper explanation for the origin of internalist intuitions, it is a fact that these intuitions are very widespread, even among externalists who regard them as misguided. And given the existence of such intuitions, DeRose's externalism provides explanation enough for the dialectic of skeptical argument.

Contextualism thus fails to address the epistemologically interesting form of skepticism and it attempts to explain a phenomenon for which there is already adequate and independent explanation. It is a view we should not endorse.

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